The Flaying

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The Flaying

by Vulpesmellifera

Summary

FBI Agents Will Graham and Jack Crawford are called out to Fire Creek, Kentucky, to investigate a victim-mutilating, kudzu-tying killer. Will, armed with extra-sensory perception, must discover the connection between three brutalized bodies and ensnare the Kudzu Killer before they strike again.

But something unfathomable watches from the trees. And it doesn't help that he's waylaid by an unwavering attraction to an unlikely benefactor of Fire Creek. Hannibal Lecter's enigmatic smile may hide secrets not only pertaining to the investigation, but also to the secret nature of Will's second sight.

That is, if Will survives.

Notes

I wrote this fanfic in 2019. I happened to mention it in a Mystrade discord, and everyone said, "Edit it! Post it", which, let's be honest, they were right. Why am I sitting on some 90,000 words of Hannigram goodness? So I took it out and began burnishing and polishing with the help of my fantastic beta, AnneCumberbatch. A million thank yous, wifey!

This is an AU where Will Graham and Jack Crawford are partners in the FBI, still working on behalf of Quantico. Some roles have changed--Bev and Jimmy make up Team Sassy Science, but Zeller makes an appearance in a new role.

I wrote it while listening to this playlist.

I welcome comments, as I find them encouraging! I am posting weekly.

From the bottom of my Hannigram-loving heart, thank you for reading.

Chapter 1

Prologue

Bobby Avery is no stupid shit. People think what they like, and they do, but it don't matter none. He can set a spell in the woods, rifle balanced in the crook of his arm, kneel in the cool morning dew as the sun threads gold through grey sky. Set a spell as his mind quiets until suddenly he's thinking hard on his choices: stick around here with no assets, no opportunities, no way to advance in this shit town with its closed mines, or get the hell outta dodge. Fire Creek is one diner, one gas station, and one stoplight. It's a dead end, and anytime he smells the sweet scent of meth cooking in the hills, he's reminded of his third option, the one he won't consider. He's seen what the drug does, and it won't drag him down the same way it has some of his neighbors.

No, he's getting out. Been working on an online degree, some liberal arts degree from an accredited college. And Addy's been working on hers between hours babysitting and shifts at the school as a substitute teacher.

A rustling in the brush tears him from his thoughts. Squirrels, tumbling over one another in the early hours of a May morning. But it isn't squirrels he's after. Deer's his game, even out of season. He's seen a buck with eight points, and he's aiming to get it before he and Addy take off. They'll head for Louisville or Lexington, find proper work and get a place of their own. Hang that rack on the wall somewhere as the one good trophy they got from their podunk town in the middle of Nowhere, Kentucky.

Not that he doesn't like the trees. The land is beautiful, no matter what's said about the town or its people. His favorite moments are out here in the quiet, just as the forest wakes. Chipmunks squeak with alarm as his boots near, black ants as shiny as coins crawl over mushroom-speckled logs, and birds belt their cheery songs overhead. Beneath the leafy arms of the trees, the peace is almost touchable, like a gentle breeze against the skin. This land is about the only thing he'll miss, aside from his mama. And with Addy coming with him, he doesn't need anything else in this world.

He rises from his crouch, back strong and straight. Memories of his father's complaints curl in his ears—his old man stooped with a permanent bend in his spine from years of carpentry work. Bobby didn't want the same life, working carpentry and odd jobs around town, getting paid under the table from those who could afford it, bartering with those who couldn't. No one's getting paid for full value, and his pa did solid work. He deserved better than the accident that killed him. Paying for his funeral had meant sticking him in a plain pine box and lodging him in the earth with the smallest marker, his name only, not even a year engraved. Couldn't afford the additional numbers. His poor mama still leaves flowers every Sunday.

That doesn't have to be Addy one day. She deserves more.

He draws in a lungful of the cool mountain air. The breeze picks up, and that's when he smells it. Copper and rot. There and gone. Wrinkles his nose. He hefts his gun and stretches his legs. A large shadow circles overhead and, sure enough, it's the dark outline of a vulture, feathery wings spanning six feet across. The first is joined by a second, every bit as big and spooky. Sure as shit there's a dead animal nearby. The scavengers circle until one disappears into the canopy. The second follows.

His mama used to say these birds carry the souls of the dead. He'd think of it when his pa died. His old man's spine unbending, unfurling like the frond of a fern, spreading his arms wide and carried by the bird to Heaven. If that's where the dead go.

Curiosity nips him as the coppery rot smell drifts across his path again. Has to be something bigger than a squirrel to stink like that. Maybe a coyote or a bear? Hopefully not that beautiful buck with the eight points. That'd be a sad sight, though he'll still take the rack.

He picks his way through the brush, avoiding the thorny stands of devil's walking stick, ducking beneath the branches of witch hazel and Chinkapin oak. The buds of the mimosa tree are fit to burst like fireworks, and the sedges grow long enough to bend beneath their own weight, hiding a carpet of dead leaves. Sweat pebbles between his shoulder blades.

When the wind shifts, the smell billows, singes the inside of Bobby's nose. The dark carrion birds move about in the trees overhead. There's more than just the first two—big sonuvabitches with wary gazes set on him. By the time the smell is less of an occasional fart-waft and more of an all-pervading stench, he counts at least twenty of the birds. Ahead through the brush, two more rise from the ground and settle into the trees, joining their dark brethren.

An unnatural shape, something you don't see growing from limbs, hangs in the trees. Bobby parts a swag of hemlock and halts, breath stealing from his lungs. Panic flares in his chest like gas on a fire, and his mouth dries instantly.

It's human. Or it was once. Still? Oh god. The belly is split and entrails hang like blood-soaked ribbons swinging in the wind. Green kudzu snakes around its arms and neck, a sightless head lolling to one side, mouth parted and black. The flesh is twisted—burned? No. Great swaths of glistening, corded muscle, purple and red and pink. White, shiny fat hangs in chunks.

Bobby's skinned enough animals to know what he's looking at. When he can suck air back into lungs, his voice rips from him in a scream.

The vultures shift on the branches, their feathers whispering like the leaves.

Chapter 1

"Miss you, too," Jack mumbles. He ends the call and places the cell in the pocket of his jacket.

Will glances, the urge to ask about Bella on the tip of his tongue, but it's quelled by the tight-lipped expression shaping Jack's face. It's not prying, exactly—Will and Bella have been friends for the entire three years of his and Jack's partnership. But she's Jack's wife, Jack's most treasured person, and the cancer invading her body tires her out in a way that scares all of them.

He grips the steering wheel tighter, his eyes drifting across the grey asphalt of US-25E. The trip from Quantico to Fire Creek, Kentucky is an eight hour drive and they started at five this morning. A glance in the rearview mirror tells him the dark circles cradling his eyes are bigger than usual, giving him thoughts of raccoons. Just the other night he cleaned up the trash they dragged from his bins, the crafty little shits.

Desperate for conversation, he says, "Tell me again about this case."

Jack hums, sips his coffee, and pulls out the briefing. "We should've got this case sooner. These are not your everyday murders."

"The skin removal is a new twist."

"And that's not all. Liver gone on one, kidneys on the second, and tongue on the third."

"Trophies."

"Could be," Jack says, his deep voice filling the car as he launches into the details. "The first victim was James Cooney, found on February 28, age twenty-six, white male out of Barbourville. Strung up in a tree with kudzu, skin missing along his torso, his face, and his scalp. Liver gone. He was eviscerated. Cause of death was believed to be blood loss, though let's hope the poor fucker passed out long before that." He flips the page, smacking it with his broad, black fingers as he did it. "Second victim is Madeleine Goddard, age thirty-five, white female from Artemus, found the same way. This time, kidneys were removed. Her body was found on April fifth. That's when Prurnell and Honeycutt got called in. In the course of their investigation, they got nothing."

Will humphs. Kade Prurnell and Drew Honeycutt are two of their least favorite agents. 'Differing philosophies,' is how Jack puts it. 'Assholes to anyone who won't lick their butts' is how Will likes to frame it.

"Our latest victim is a man named William Ashcroft, age forty-eight, white male, of Fire Creek. Found yesterday, May 2nd. Same as the others, but his tongue was removed."

"Jesus Christ. Why didn't they call us on the first one?" Will tucks a curl behind his ear. His hair is a tangle of dark brown curls. Taming it is at least a fifteen minute process, and this morning he took five out of necessity. Skipped trimming his beard and mustache, too.

"The first case seems to have involved a bigshot sheriff who was trying to collar the murderer on his own. And you know how Prurnell and company operate. But now they have an honest-to-god serial killer on their hands and the AD came down on their office hard. They were forced to get us involved." Jack closes the file and stares out the windshield. Will observes him from the corner of his eye. Jack's a big man, with dark skin and a heavy brow.

His suits look a little loose lately, and his usually bright and alert expression seems wan. Lost. Staring into the distance, into an abyss of fear where there is no more Bella. Keeping that fear locked tight in his chest—

Will snaps his thoughts away from Jack. It isn't fair to go wallowing around in his partner's emotional quagmire whether Jack's aware or not. Jack doesn't appreciate it when Will turns his "excess empathy" toward him, and if he knew Will was doing it just now he'd turn sour about it all day. That's the last thing Will needs, especially after a long, early morning drive.

"Okay. Kudzu. Interesting choice," he says, for lack of anything better.

Jack ignores that. "Katz and Price are meeting us there."

Will almost smiles. They're his favorite forensic team. "Tell me more about Fire Creek. I've never been anywhere in Knox County."

Jack goes back to the file. "Population of less than a thousand. Its unemployment rate stays steady at about seven percent, and it has serious issues with drugs, poverty, and low education rates."

"Great. Any connection between the victims?"

"Let's see. James Cooney worked for his father at Cooney Energy Company, a coal mining 'service.' He got a degree in Civil Engineering at University of Kentucky. Single, lives alone. He had a gym membership, and his housekeeper had a key to the apartment. She had an alibi at the time of his disappearance. A Cooney Energy employee, Connor McCabe, found his body at one of the company sites a week after he was reported missing. Madeleine Goddard worked as a waitress in Barbourville—"

"A place James Cooney frequented?"

"I don't know. That's something we'll have to ask. She didn't have a college degree, though her sister says she was taking some online classes. Ms. Goddard was single and lived in the house she and her sister inherited from their parents. Her sister, Phoebe Hanes, lived with her."

Will jerks his chin. "So far we have Kentucky and single. Where was her body found?"

"In her backyard. She was last seen alive on the afternoon of April fourth. Neighbor saw her body over the fence the next day."

"Jesus."

Jack flicks a look at Will before going back to the file. "William Ashcroft had an MBA from Eastern Kentucky University, but didn't seem to be doing anything with it. Lived on a trust fund. Married, living with his wife Melinda Ashcroft on Ashcroft land in Fire Creek. His body was found on his land. In the woods, by a local hunter named Robert Avery. Goes by Bobby."

"All three were found on their own properties…"

“James Cooney didn’t own the land where he was found. The coal company contracted it for mountaintop removal.”

“The killer might still see it as the family’s land. Madeleine Goddard found in her backyard. William Ashcroft found on his land.”

“The Ashcroft property is some four hundred acres of Kentucky Appalachia.”

Something pings in Will’s chest. He grew up in West Virginia, nestled deep in an Appalachian holler. Small town. Hard working people with few jobs to go around. Including his father who was most often seen as the town nutjob. Harmless, but nutty.

He focuses on the road as he veers toward their exit. “And the cops didn’t find any connections between the first two?”

“Not a one,” Jack clips out. He closes the file with some finality. “I’m hoping we solve this case quickly and go home.”

Jack’s thinking of Bella. Will turns his thoughts to his own home. A one-bedroom apartment with a bathroom so tiny when he sits on the toilet his knees practically touch the opposite wall. He’s only 5’10”; it’s not as though his legs are freakishly long. He’s lived there, alone, for two years. Dates are easy to get, but no one wants to stay longer than a fuck. Not once they start to catch on to his…problems. No one likes to sleep in a bed with a stranger who has regular night terrors. One guy ended up with a split lip. Another with a bloody nose.

It doesn’t help that he gives off a creepy vibe. He knows what people are feeling. Sometimes he knows better than they do. When guys start to pick up on his unfailingly accurate perception, they feel exposed. They run.

He chews on his lower lip as the exit sign for Fire Creek appears on the side of the road. “Alright. Get ready to see our favorite comedy duo.”

Jack snorts derisively, but at least he’s present, snapped from the abyss where he floats.

And that keeps Will from following him down.

The downtown is leaning slabs of brick seamed with white peeling trim. Most of the storefronts are vacant. Each building presses against its neighbor with all the tired apathy of barflies lined up for drinks at the end of the night, this bartop being a ribbon of road. The Town Hall hunches at the corner of the lone four-way traffic light, directly across from the pristine white of a clapboard church. A sign out front declares in a bold, italicized font His Holiness Baptist Church. Colorful pansies speckle the gardens like scattered Dippin Dots.

They park at the Town Hall behind a dusty pick-up truck and, flashing their badges at a curious town clerk, find their way to the basement. The coroner’s office lies at the end of a

corridor of blue-checked linoleum and clashing green walls. Will nearly trips on a blistering tile, but Jack steadies him with a hand on his elbow.

They open a door painted with ‘Zebediah Ingram, Coroner’ in gold lettering. Relief hits Will when he sees Beverly Katz, standing with her hips cocked and her arms folded, waiting on the other side. If he were a grumpy, misanthropic alley cat more likely to scratch a person than look at one, Beverly would be the one exception to that rule.

“Well, fancy meeting you here,” she says with a friendly punch to his arm. She’s nearly as tall as him, with hair like a black waterfall and artfully arched eyebrows. But the smile on her face is a tight one, the one that says she wishes she could punch something a little harder. Not him. Someone or something else.

Her partner in nearly everything, Jimmy Price, looks on with a bright smile. “Mr. Ingram was just treating us to his opinions on governance and immigration.” His twinkling eyes slide over to Beverly, who is third-generation Korean-American.

Jesus Christ. Well. There’s Beverly’s target.

Jack ignores them. “Mr. Ingram, I’m Agent Jack Crawford, and this is my partner, Agent Will Graham. We’re here to see the body of William Ashcroft, and take down any information you can give us on the deceased.” He’s all business. No smile. Speaks by rote.

Mr. Ingram takes his time to remove his glasses and wipe them with the hem of his shirt. He’s a small man with white hair and a face pinched like a weasel’s. Red sclera—either the result of allergies or the onset of glaucoma, if Will had to wager. Letting himself assume Mr. Ingram’s point of view, it doesn’t take much to realize the coroner didn’t like the deceased man, but he respected him.

He definitely doesn’t like FBI agents.

“Sheriff Mosley told me you were coming,” Mr. Ingram prevaricates, “but I didn’t expect—”

The door bursts open. A man with the typical brown broad-brimmed hat and a brass-colored sheriff’s badge steps in. Beneath the fan of walnut-brown mustache is a fierce frown, and narrowed blue eyes pierce each agent as his gaze shifts around the room. “I thought you agents would be meeting me at the sheriff’s office.” His voice is a rough slap of Southern drawl, and his jaw juts in anger. The atmosphere in the room immediately tightens with the anticipation of a confrontation.

“Apologies, Sheriff Mosley. I need the forensics team to take a look at the body as soon as possible, and my partner and I are here to coordinate. I’m happy you could meet us here,” A slight smirk teases Jack’s lips. It seems he’s found someone to prick at with the needles of his anger and helplessness.

A deputy follows the sheriff. Tall, gangly, tan, with a long face and striking blue eyes. His gaze lingers a little too long on Beverly, who looks like she might flip him the bird at any moment.

Knowing Jimmy is probably having a field day, Will sneaks a peek at him. Indeed, Jimmy's face is so lit with anticipation, he might pull up a chair and break out popcorn at any moment.

The sheriff is still blustering. "This might be your case, but this is my town. You should know more about its people before you come in here—"

"Army man, aren't you, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Mosley shifts his stance, straightening his shoulders and tipping his chin up. He's almost as tall as Jack, his shoulders nearly as broad. Come to think of it, he must work out. Will lets his eyes follow the lines on the uniform. Yeah, the sheriff is pretty fit.

Movement from Jimmy catches his attention—a nod and a wink. Will's cheeks flush at being caught.

"Yeah." Sheriff Mosley stands with his fists on his hips. "What's it to you?"

Jack tucks his hands into his pockets and rocks back on his feet as he blithely goes in for the kill. "Then an army man such as yourself must be familiar with hierarchy."

The deputy's eyes widen as the sheriff's expression shifts from mad to murderous. Will decides it's time to step in. "Great. We're all here now. Let's see the body."

Jimmy claps his hands together with delight. "Yes, let's."

Beverly elbows him.

The sheriff doesn't miss it, and something about it ticks him off. "Bill Ashcroft," he begins, "was a respected member of our community. A lot of people are mourning his loss today. No one deserves to go the way he did." His pitted face turns red as his Adam's apple bobs. "I don't want you treating him with disrespect."

"No disrespect here, Sheriff," Jack says in his placating voice, the one that he reserves for widows and children. And assholes he wants out of the way. "We just want to take a look at the body, and solve the case."

The sheriff nods. "When will you release the body?"

"When we're finished," Jack says.

"The family wants to bury him—"

"We will do our best to be speedy and efficient, won't we?" He directs a meaningful glance at the two forensic examiners. Bev and Jimmy nod.

"Scout's Honor," Jimmy says, holding his hand up in what is definitely not the Scout's sign. It's the Vulcan signal for 'Live Long and Prosper.'

Will can tell Jack is suppressing the roll of his eyes, so he interrupts. "We'll need to speak with the family later. Any information you can give us on Mr. Ashcroft would be helpful,

Sheriff."

Sheriff Mosley pins Will with a mistrustful glare. "Deputy Zeller will be on hand to aid you in your investigation when I can spare him. I'm due to the mayor's office."

Deputy Zeller follows that with a sharp nod and not so subtle smile at Beverly, who pointedly ignores him.

"Then don't let us keep you." Jack gives him a tight-lipped smile as he clasps his hands behind his back. "Thank you for welcoming us into town, Sheriff."

Mosley sends him one last caustic glare, opens the door, and steps out. Zeller stays, eyes darting around the room as if bewildered by how he ended up there.

"Well, now that the dick-waving contest is over, let's see the body," Beverly says.

"Charming," Jack grunts.

"You should've heard her in the car ride over," Jimmy says. "She's a gem."

"Stop." Jack holds up one hand. "Mr. Ingram, if you would, please."

Mr. Ingram gives an annoyed sigh, one that requires the shrug and sag of his shoulders, and leads them into the autopsy room. Or, what passes for the autopsy room in this tiny town. It's cramped. Morgue drawers bank one wall. A black body bag is displayed on a stainless steel table beneath bright lights.

A young man leans over a far table, his hair scraped back and shiny like he spent an hour gelling it. He spins to face them, his shoulders hunched. He's tall, but he's immediately made nervous by their presence.

"Danny, these FBI agents are here to see Mr. Ashcroft's body."

Danny nods. "Yes, sir." His voice is deep and gravelly.

"You can wait in my office."

"Yes, sir." His cheeks turn pink as if the idea of anyone looking at him mortifies him, and he shuffles out of the room.

Beverly and Jimmy head over to the table without a hitch of hesitation in their steps. Will's seen Beverly devour an entire curry that resembled the innards of the man she'd just autopsied. Death doesn't usually bother him and Jack, but the forensics team treats it like a Saturday night game of Operation with the family.

Once Ingram unzips the bag, Will barely suppresses a sharp inhale. A macabre grin of yellowish teeth greets them, the lips missing. More skin is missing in patches across the shoulders, the chest, and the belly. Pale grey ribbons of fat lace dull pink muscles and whitish tendons.

“The eyes are gone,” Beverly says.

“Birds,” Mr. Ingram replies calmly, as if discussing the weather.

Will can see it in his mind’s eye. Crows. Vultures. Carrion birds swiftly rising into the air with their prized morsels pinched in the scissor of their beaks. Or maybe they’d settle, claim a spot right at the shoulder. Swallow bits of flesh whole before they bite again, tearing with their strong beaks, stripping the bones of defenseless, soft tissue.

A loud sigh bursts from Beverly before she launches into a bevy of questions. “Was it done post-mortem? Have you sent the bloodwork out to a lab? Determined what type of weapon might have been used to peel skin from the body?”

“I was told to hold the body for the FBI,” Mr. Ingram says unhelpfully.

“Yeah. Of course. Alright, Price, let’s get to work.” She unshoulders her black leather jacket and heads for the sink tucked into the corner.

“Will?” Jack prompts.

Will steps forward. Looks over the long tracks of missing skin and twisted, exposed musculature. Places where the birds have ripped the meat. The man had extra padding around the middle. Fatty tissue resembles porridge in the fluorescent lighting. The peritoneal cavity is perforated. Entrails pile like red-brown snakes atop his belly. It’s gross. He’s seen enough results of violence in his two years at the FBI, but at first glance this seems like unhinged butchery.

Yet there’s something about it. A closer look at the cut made to the stomach reveals a careful splitting of the skin. Neat lines. Methodical. Scalpel to skin. Did the killer use a scalpel?

Lingchi. The death of a thousand cuts.

Bill was strung with kudzu. Kudzu is a fast-growing vine from Asia. In 1935, when prairies suffered devastating dust storms, Congress enlisted kudzu as a primary soldier in the battle against widespread soil erosion, and sold land cheaply to farmers who would plant it. Years later, when kudzu proved to be a poor crop for farmers, its roots were firmly in place as the vine shimmied along roadsides and up trees and over abandoned cars.

The killer (or killers, considering the strength it takes to pull a full-sized man up a tree without a pulley system) positioned William Ashcroft in the shape of the crucifixion. Nude. Not hung in the sun, but shaded in a forest, concealed by the dappled darkness and overseeing a cool spring. No one would have found him if it wasn’t for Robert Avery poaching on Ashcroft land. Did the killer hope his victim wouldn’t be found? It seems unlikely, since the other two bodies were easily discovered.

And crucifixion. It can take days to die from that kind of torture, or it could take hours. The killer didn’t spike Ashcroft’s wrists and feet, and instead tied them with vines. Still, crucifixion is not just a tool for punishment, but also a sign of warning. A threat.

Yet this guy was hidden.

Unless…unless the killer knows about Robert Avery's activities.

"Well, the act of crucifixion is obvious. He's being punished," Will says.

"Punished for what?" Jack asks.

"Not clear, yet." There's something oddly…blank. Usually when faced with a victim, Will can pick up on strong emotions. "Vibes," Jack jokes. Will's a tuning fork for feelings, including residual ones that occur in a murder. Here, he can only pick up short, choppy notes, like a radio with static. Except it isn't static…it's just quiet. He steps closer to the body, ignoring Beverly's frown as she sets up her recorder.

There. Just there, he can sense something. It's faint. "He's...trespassed, somehow. Now he's...he's been punished and...this is the guy with the missing tongue?"

Mr. Ingram clears his throat before he replies. "Yes."

"Maybe he said something he shouldn't have." That's lazy profiling and Jack knows it. Will ignores Jack's burning gaze. "I need to see the site."

Jack nods. "When Katz and Price are ready."

Will looks back at the body. It pulls him in, a darkness surrounds him like black smoke. He's no longer looking at the body—he's in the body. Someone has him, his arms wrenched behind him. Moonlight against steel like a needle in the night.

Just when the blade bites, he's thrown back into the autopsy room.

What the fuck?

Cold pours like river water down his back. This isn't normal. This one's different. Something's there that shouldn't be. Or at least, something he's never encountered before. A creeping-fingers sensation that touches something in the back of his mind. If memories were silt settled at the bottom of a river, this was a giant foot stepping in and stirring it to murky whirlpools. Nothing clear. Nothing substantial.

Powerful. Unknown. Yet somehow familiar. Like deja vu, maybe. He reaches out to steady himself and Jack grabs him by the shoulders. "Will?" Jack's voice sounds distant, like they're underwater and sinking, sinking...

Something knows he's here.

Will shakes that thought away, wherever it came from. "This is different," he says.

"What do you mean, different?"

Everyone's eyes are on him. He doesn't have to look; he can feel the weight of their gazes. It doesn't surprise him when Jack steers him from the room, pushing him along quickly but

keeping him upright as they swing through the door.

“What is it?” Jack asks once they’re out in the corridor. His eyes are intense, brooding. Fixing Will where he stands. “Your spidey-senses tingling?” Jack’s favorite label for Will’s ability is this one, and it usually makes Will smile.

Not this time.

“This is…” It’s unexplainable. Something strange has touched the body, something lingers in his mind still. Something old.

Then it clicks. Snaps. The feeling, the motive behind the kill.

“Jack,” he says, his voice croaking. “This is retribution.”

“Retribution? How’s that different from punishment?”

“It’s ritual. It’s significant. I don’t know anymore than that.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. Pressure throbs behind his eyes.

Jack sticks his hands in his pockets and pivots on his feet. “Okay. Fine. Listen. Uh. Why don’t we go talk to this Avery fella and see what he has to say. The Dynamic Duo can meet us at the site later.”

“Yeah. Good. Let’s do that.” He’d rather get as far from the body as he can anyway.

Once they’re outside and heading for the car, the nape of his neck prickles with the sense of being watched. He scans the street. Across the way, an eatery called “Betty’s” is squeezed between a salvage shop and a furniture store. Other buildings contain empty storefronts, and further down the road is the sign for a mobile home park. The Appalachian Mountains rise all around the town, rolling in beautiful shades of green beneath a periwinkle sky.

No faces in the windows. No people on the street and no passing cars. Will stands outside the passenger side of their rental, Jack having claimed the driver’s side. They stick out like sore thumbs in their sleek suits and polished shoes, but this isn’t anything new. They’ve worked in poverty-stricken parts of Kentucky before.

Instead, it feels as though something inside him has aroused, something that stretches and pitches toward the mountains into the waiting arms of the primordial forest. A siren call hangs heavy but silent in the air, and inside his chest, something answers.

Chapter 2

“This is the residence of Rhonda Avery, Robert’s mother. He lives here along with his three younger sisters.” Jack and Will exit the car, Jack filling him in on info in the files. “Robert discovered the body yesterday morning at around 5:30 a.m. He’s twenty-three. Sheriff Mosley says he does odd jobs around town. All they got from him yesterday is that he was out walking, accidentally crossed over onto Ashcroft land and found Bill Ashcroft’s body in a tree.”

“How’d he take it?”

“Sheriff says he’s a mess.” Jack’s response is like a shrug. Who wouldn’t be a mess after discovering a body butchered and strung up?

The house is an old clapboard farmhouse. Touch-me-nots riddle the garden beds with colorful splotches of red and purple. An American flag hangs from the porch, lifting with the spring breeze as if to wave them in.

The screen door opens and an older chubby woman in blue overalls steps onto the porch. She wears her brassy blonde hair in a bun, bits of it escaping into the breeze, sending them writhing around her red cheeks. “Can I help you?” she calls.

“FBI, ma’am. I’m Jack Crawford, and this is my partner, Will Graham. We’re here to speak with Mr. Robert Avery. Are you Rhonda Avery?”

She skewers them with a hard gaze, her blue eyes becoming furious. “He’s had to say enough.”

Jack raises his brows, rolls on the balls of his feet with his hands in his jacket pockets. Relaxed. Harmless. “I understand, but we want to catch who did this. We won’t take up too much of your time.”

“Mm-hm. Might as well come in.” Her hands clutch a blue dish towel, and her knuckles look raw and red from washing too many dishes. Black moons under her eyes speak to a lack of sleep, and with her acting as the gatekeeper between the law and her son, Will can imagine she spent the night before smoking on the porch with her rifle ready, wishing she could use it.

“I’m Ms. Avery.”

“Thank you for letting us in, Ms. Avery.” Jack’s heavy feet clunk up the steps. Will follows more quietly behind.

Ms. Avery, tight-lipped and sharp-eyed, ushers them into a small living room cramped with overstuffed flower-print furniture. The TV blares some show on fly-fishing. Seated on the sofa are three people, two young men and a woman.

The woman is probably only twenty, ruddy-skinned and auburn-haired. She keeps one arm protectively looped around the shoulders of the man sitting in the middle. Her knee jiggles against the couch while her dark eyes lock onto the entering agents.

The other man, the one not currently beneath her arm, stands and greets them with a quick nod. He's as tall as Jack with shoulders like a linebacker, stretching the fabric of his flannel. A Louisville Cardinals cap clamps down bushy brown hair and shades his eyes to pitch-dark. Will's keeping his "spidey-senses" reined in after what happened in the morgue, but this guy, maybe early twenties, wavers between curious—in the forward glint of his eyes—and defensive, in the hunch of his shoulders and the jab of his hands into his jeans' pockets. Something about his movement reminds Will of someone, but he can't quite place it.

The guy still sitting on the sofa beside the anxious woman keeps his eyes glued to the television. This is Robert Avery. Baby faced, like he's no hope of ever growing a beard, and pink lips that seem to form a permanent pout. Will can't see his eyes because of the brim of his hat, also proclaiming him a fan of the Cardinals.

"Bobby." Rhonda Avery grabs the remote from the coffee table and flips the TV off. The blank screen reflects their awkward tableau of standing and sitting figures. "These gentlemen are here to see you. From the actual FBI." She balls up the towel in her fists. "I'll get us some tea."

Robert—Bobby—Avery's chin dips to his chest, the awning of his cap further obscuring his face. The young woman rubs the back of his neck with her hand, and whispers something in his ear.

"Do you mind if I call you Bobby? Or would you prefer Robert? Mr. Avery, even," Jack asks. He settles himself in an armchair across from the sofa, beside the TV.

After a loud release of air, the guy says, "Bobby's fine."

"Haven't you got manners?" Will jerks at the severity in Rhonda's voice.

"Sir," Bobby says. "Bobby's fine, *sir."*

"You can call me Jack." He looks at the other two people. "Jack Crawford. And you are?"

"I'm Addison McKee," the woman says. She has a pretty face. Fair-skinned and freckled. "That's my brother, Danny."

The standing man nods. Holds his hand out to Jack, who shakes it. Danny McKee seems nervous, or maybe excited. Probably not a lot going on in this town, and now here's a murder investigation. Some people love to cling to the edges of drama.

"And how do you know Bobby?"

"He's my boyfriend," Addy says. "And Danny's best friend."

Danny gives a sharp nod.

“Y’all grow up here?” Jack takes a seat.

Addy bobs her chin, shifting closer to Bobby.

“Well, we need to speak with Bobby alone, if you don’t mind.”

Addy tightens her hold on Bobby, the pinch of her face deepening.

“It’s okay, sir. I don’t mind them here. I already told them…about what I saw.” Bobby swallows hard, his Adam’s apple juddering.

“Alright then.” Jack leans forward, pulling on his pant legs as he does. He places his elbows on his thighs and lets his hands clasp as they hang down. He lasers his focus on Bobby. Jack’s an impressive man, with serious brown eyes and a broad, open face that broadcasts every one of his feelings, but especially when he’s feeling grave about something. “Bobby, I need you to tell me how you came across the body. Every detail you can remember.”

Everyone waits. Addison rubs Bobby’s arm with her free hand. Danny stands as still as a post. Ms. Avery enters with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of sweet tea which she places on a side table, pushing a flourishing Christmas cactus to one side. The ice crackles in the quiet as she pours each of them a glass. Will accepts his with a small smile of thanks.

“They say it’s Mr. Ashcroft,” Bobby finally says.

“Bill Ashcroft. That’s right.” Jack’s voice is gentle.

“Should’ve been Harry.”

“Bobby,” Addison McKee rebukes in a soft hiss.

“Bobby Avery,” Ms. Avery delivers in a scolding tone, hands on her hips. “A man is dead—”

“It wasn’t my fault, mama,” Bobby’s head snaps up to face his mother, and Will can finally see the blue of his eyes. Frightened as a rabbit.

“Of course it’s not, but you show the dead respect.” She spits the word out like a curse.

“Would it help to speak with us alone, Bobby?” Jack asks. Ms. Avery opens her mouth as if to speak, but a side-eye glance from Jack makes her bite down on her lip instead.

“It’s okay,” Bobby says. “I was out shootin’ squirrels.” He sniffs. Rubs his nose with the fore knuckle of his right hand then knocks his cap from his head. A blond fringe falls forward on his brow. It fits his baby face, with his apple cheeks and pink mouth. “I wasn’t really paying attention to where I was going. Just followin’ an old deer trail and...I like walkin’ ‘round early in the morning like that. It’s peaceful.”

Jack says, “Sounds nice. I go fishing sometimes. I love the early morning on the river by myself.” He elbows Will. “Keep trying to get this one to come with.”

Will keeps from shuddering. He doesn’t swim. The water is full of things Jack can’t see.

Bobby meets their gazes. His blue eyes glimmer like twin pools of water. Will can tell he's grateful for the olive branch Jack's just offered. It detracts from the big, scary FBI man persona Jack sometimes carries with him. "Yeah. And I noticed some vultures in the air. There was this smell. It was nasty."

It's easy to imagine what Bobby must have been smelling.

"I followed the birds and the smell got worse. I thought it might be a deer or a bear…" He cuts his gaze to the floor. "I didn't think it would be anything like that." His voice gets quieter. "I couldn't tell what it was right away. Up in that tree."

"That's enough." Rhonda Avery speaks in a threatening, ragged tone. "He's been through enough. The sheriff got his statement. The other agents made him talk. You know what he found in that tree."

Will takes a sip of the sweet tea to hide his expression.

Jack doesn't relent. "Did you hear anything? Smell anything else?"

"Just the birds, sir. I still hear their wings."

Jack leans back, his eyes still riveted to Bobby. Bobby stares at the floor. "How well do you know the Ashcrofts, Bobby?"

Bobby lifts one shoulder. "I painted their shed once, a couple years back. Everyone knows who they are. Bigshots."

Jack's eyes slide across everyone. Will measures their responses, lets his "senses" out, just a little, like throwing out a net. Rhonda is seething but she's first and foremost worried about her son. Addison McKee is in agreement with Bobby on his assessment of the Ashcrofts. Danny McKee is trying to make himself look as small as possible.

"Bigshots?" Jack asks.

"They got money." He shrugs again. Shifts in his seat. Addison releases him from her hold. "Ms. Ashcroft is real nice. I'm sorry her husband's dead. I bet she's sad."

"But when you say 'it should have been Harry?'"

"Just hot air," Rhonda says. "Harry Ashcroft is a mite rude, but that's no reason to wish death on him."

"I don't wish death on no one," Bobby says. "No one. I'm just sayin', is all. Harry's always been the bigger prick, hasn't he?"

"Sweet Lord," Ms. Avery says as she crosses herself. Addison drops her face into her hands. Will takes another sip, but his smile breaks through anyway.

"Did they pay you well for this paint job, Bobby?" Jack's lips twitch as he asks. Will knows he's holding in his own smile.

“It was fair for the job, but they didn’t tip me. And that’s just not right, comin’ from rich folks like them.”

His mother scoffs. “Bobby Avery, I swear we raised you better than this.”

“It’s true, mama.” *Jesus Christ, this kid’s a puppy.*

“Harry Ashcroft is Bill Ashcroft’s brother, then?” Jack asks. They know he is. It’s on the paperwork.

“He is, and they all go to church just like any other family,” Rhonda says.

Will clears his throat. All gazes swivel to him. “Do you know of anyone who had a problem with Mr. Bill Ashcroft?”

“Well, it’s just like those other murders, isn’t it?” Ms. Avery asks. “Seems to me it’s some lunatic, and poor Bill was just out at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Sure, but we have to be thorough, so if you do know of anyone, we need to know about it.”

Ms. Avery, Addison, and Bobby shake their heads. Danny keeps still.

“Mr. McKee?” Will prompts.

“What? Oh. No. I don’t know.”

Jack speaks. “Did any of you know James Cooney or Madeleine Goddard?”

Ms. Avery shakes her head emphatically. “Weren’t from this town.”

Jack focuses on Bobby again. “One more thing. When you were out in the woods, did you hear or see anything unusual aside from Mr. Ashcroft’s body? Anyone else out there walking about? Any footprints that didn’t belong to you?”

“No, sir,” he says. “Nothin’. Don’t normally see anyone out at that time over there.”

Meaning this wasn’t the first time he was trespassing on Ashcroft land.

“Thank you for your time,” Jack says and stands.“If you think of anything that could be helpful to our investigation, please call us.” He hands his card to Bobby, who takes it without looking at it, and he hands one to Rhonda, who reads it and rereads it before nodding.

“Thanks for the tea, ma’am,” Will says. “It was delicious.”

“You’re welcome.” She’s the consummate host again, accepting the half empty glasses and showing them the door. Her smile is only a thin veneer of politeness, though. “I do hope you catch whoever’s done this.”

“We’re working on it, ma’am,” Jack says.

She shuts the door. Before they step off the porch, the door opens again. She closes it, keeping her out on the porch with them.

Before speaking, she glances at the windows. The TV is back on, the show's narrator muffled through the glass. "I just thought you should know I was the one who went and picked him up." She folds her arms. "He was a babblin', cryin' mess. Shakin'. Kept yellin' 'bout a skinned man in a tree."

"Did he call you first?" Jack asks.

"Yep. From his cell. It was a bit spotty. Couldn't even tell what he was sayin' over the phone. He told me where he was parked and I met him out there." Ms. Avery hugs herself, her eyes no longer as fierce as they were when they first arrived. "I'm tellin' you this because I'm worried my boy is a suspect, and he ain't a murderer. He's always been good. He's not his best today. But he's always been respectful, never got into drugs or fights or nothin'." She shakes her head, glances again at the window, and steps close enough to them that Will can smell peaches. "When I'd found him, he'd wet his pants. Embarrassin' for a man to wet his pants." Her face begs them to understand her, to sympathize with her son's plight.

"Ma'am," Jack says soothingly, "At this time in our investigation, you have nothing to worry about."

She steps away, rubs her arms like she's caught a chill, her eyes downcast. "Well, anyway, I just thought you should know."

"We appreciate it, Ms. Avery," Will says.

"It's a serial killer, right?" The two men are caught again in the intensity of her blue gaze. "The shows say it takes three murders."

Jack and Will exchange glances. Jack answers. "To be honest, it's too early to say. I understand people may be panicked; concerned for their own lives and for the well-being of their families. I advise you to take precautions, but don't get overly worried."

Rhonda Avery nods, and then she drops her arms and nearly dashes for her front door, opening it and tossing a, "Goodbye," over her meaty shoulder before disappearing inside her house.

Jack clomps down the steps and checks his phone. "The Dynamic Duo probably isn't done yet. Why don't we visit Melinda Ashcroft?"

"All aboard," Will says.

The road leading to the Ashcrofts winds around hills and ribbons through forest before opening onto a green, scenic valley of criss-crossing rail fences. Two brick houses squat across from one another in the middle of it all. The house on the left is wreathed by the weathered grey barn behind it. Cows graze across the greenery.

They head for the house on the right, where the widowed Melinda Ashcroft lives.

“Melinda Ashcroft is forty-four, and was married to Bill Ashcroft for twenty-three years. Their only son, Jason, is nineteen and lives in Louisville at the Frazier Rehabilitation Center.” Jack shuffles the pages back into the file. “An accidental fall led to irreparable brain damage.”

Will’s lips twist into a grimace. A slate-grey Lexus sits in the driveway. Colorful petunias and pansies line either side of the driveway, crowding against green fans of growing irises.

Jack parks the car and they get out. The house is large, larger than anything they’ve seen yet in this town, with white columns framing the doorway. Birds chirp in the distance, but no dog yaps, and no one opens the door. The cloying smell of cow manure mixes with the loamy stench of fresh mulch, making Will’s nose wrinkle.

Jack raps on the brass door knocker.

When it opens, they’re met with the face of a young woman not much older than Addison McKee. “May I help you?” Her brown eyes alight with curiosity as she looks them over. With a pencil skirt at knee-length and a blouse buttoned to her neck, she appears neat as a pin. Will wonders how wild his curls might be by now.

“I’m Jack Crawford of the FBI, this is my partner, Will Graham. We’re here to speak with Melinda Ashcroft.” He holds up his badge.

“Oh.” She looks behind her. “Is Ms. Ashcroft expecting you?”

“We need to speak with her about her husband,” Jack says. “Will you let her know we’re here?” It’s not actually a request, though he phrases it like one.

“One moment, please.” She shuts the door. Jack exhales, his thick brows arched with a look of annoyance.

After a moment, the door opens again. This time it must be Melinda Ashcroft. She’s tanned, with permed golden blonde hair, and thick mascara. Her face is sun-freckled, and her mouth is a tight frown of disapproval. “Agents, may I see your badges?”

The two agents hold them up, and she scrutinizes them with a squint of her eyes. “Come in,” she says. Will gets the feeling this is all a show for her.

They follow Ms. Ashcroft down the hall and into a sitting room. The furniture is heavy wood with tastefully faded upholstery, decked with embroidered pillows. Large windows facing south allow the sun to fill the room. A painting of a barn hangs over the stacked-stone

fireplace. It's inoffensive enough to hang in a hotel. Everything is comfortable. And expensive.

"I'll have Amanda bring us drinks." She sits on one of the chairs and gestures for the men to sit across from her on the sofa. "Would you care for sweet tea or lemonade?"

Before either of them can answer, the front door opens and slams shut. Heavy footsteps echo down the hall and a man enters the room. He's tall and broadcasting an impressive glower. A handlebar mustache sits beneath a long, arched nose and his eyebrows stick out like wisps of grey unraveling yarn. Everything about him says fancy, from the leather shoes on his feet to the cut of his velvet jacket.

"Harry," Mrs. Ashcroft says as if in surprise. "These gentlemen are here from the FBI." Tension sits heavy in her tone.

"Harold Ashcroft?" Jack stands. "I'm Agent Jack Crawford from the FBI."

Harry Ashcroft takes one step back. He sets his shoulders and hits Jack with a sharp stare. "Feds, huh? 'Bout time they called you in. If those idiots in Barbourville had called you sooner, my brother might still be alive."

Ms. Ashcroft rings a silver bell. The tinkly sound dances through the air. The young woman who had answered the door pokes her head in. "Yes, Ms. Ashcroft?"

"Amanda, bring us some lemonade." Ms. Ashcroft's hands are folded neatly in her lap. Her dress is teal, and a gold brooch of a dragonfly sits over her left breast. She's holding a lot inside, Will realizes, but she's not exactly broken up over her husband's death.

Harry Ashcroft goes to the white mantle of the fireplace and stands beside it. He doesn't look like someone who works a cow farm. Not with the sherbert orange neck scarf over the white collared shirt and the charcoal grey vest. He must have been ten years older than Bill, which puts him at late fifties. "So, do you have any leads?"

"We've just begun our investigation. That's why we're here to speak with Ms. Ashcroft about her husband's last known whereabouts." Jack sits, and directs his gaze to the widow. "When was the last time you saw your husband?" His voice is gentle now.

"Bill went out for the evening. It was Friday night. I watched my programs until ten, and then I turned in." Her gaze is strung to the carpet. Woven, a beige thing. "When I woke up the next morning, he wasn't home. His car wasn't in the driveway. There was no sign he'd ever come home. I called Harry, then, to ask him if he'd seen Bill."

Harry stands by the fireplace, a muscle in his jaw twitching, one hand balled in a fist. He's staring out the window onto the stretch of green lawn.

"He said he hadn't." She's watching Harry. Expressionless. "I called Bill's friend, Larry Temple, and he said he'd never saw Bill that night. So then I called the sheriff."

“And he gave her some guff about a twenty-four hour window—” Harry cuts himself off. He might start growling at the floor with the way he glares at it. “Bill wasn’t like that. He didn’t go off and disappear. He has— *had* responsibilities.”

“Sheriff Mosley called me yesterday.” Ms. Ashcroft goes on as if Harry hadn’t said a word. “Said he thought they’d found the body.” Her composure begins to break down, as she blinks rapidly and her hands clench.

The doorbell rings. Jack looks at her expectantly.

“It’s been going off all day,” she says with a little wave of her hand. “Amanda’ll get it. I imagine our fridge is more full of casserole than any of us can eat before it spoils.” She grabs a tissue from the box on the side table and dabs at her eyes. “You’ll take some with you, won’t you, Harry?”

Harry doesn’t look at her, just says, “Yeah,” and goes back to staring out the window with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Jack leans forward. “Ms. Ashcroft, has there been anyone around? Following you or your husband? Did he get any strange phone calls, or did any cars pass by the house that don’t normally come by?”

“I, uh, oh…” She huffs a wet laugh, and balls up the tissue in her hand. “No cars coming by. None that I noticed. Amanda does the shopping in town. Bill oversees the cows, and we’ve got two farm hands. They park at the barn on Harry’s side of the road.” She twists the tissue in her hands until it tears. “I’m afraid I don’t know. When we go to church, it’s always the same people there. You’re the first two strangers in town that I’ve seen for a while.”

“I have the same question for you, Mr. Ashcroft. Anyone hanging around that shouldn’t be? Any strange cars?”

“No,” Harry says and he says it like a stab in the air. “Nothing.” He whirls to face us, jabbing his finger in our direction. “There’s some psycho out there, and they got Billy, and it’s your job to find him.”

“That’s what we’re here to do, Mr. Ashcroft,” Jack says.

Harry spins to Melinda. “And don’t think I haven’t forgotten that Bobby Avery was trespassing. Hunting out of season, too.”

Will holds in a snort. Bill Ashcroft was only found because of Bobby Avery’s trespassing and poaching. Bill might’ve been bones hanging in a tree by the time anyone discovered them.

Melinda Ashcroft’s face smooths over as she tosses the tissue wad onto the coffee table. Her lack of response to Harry is interesting—maybe this is her polite version of rolling her eyes.

Amanda enters with four glasses of lemonade on a silver tray. She offers it to Jack and Will first. It’s not hot summertime yet, but it’s dollars to donuts that Ms. Ashcroft only drinks the

fresh stuff. Amanda probably squeezed imported lemons for half the morning. Will gladly accepts a glass.

Jack takes his with a soft thank you and refocuses on Ms. Ashcroft. “Where might your husband have gone on Friday night?”

“Well, it wasn’t poker night, I guess.” She fiddles with a gold earring. “Sometimes he went out to Rawly’s, which is a bar in the next county. Might be where his car is, now that I think of it. I thought he’d meet Larry there.”

“Did you report the car missing?” Jack asks.

“I—I didn’t think of it, when I...I was so upset about Bill. I didn’t think to ask about the car.”

Jack looks at Will and Will nods. Nothing about the car’s been mentioned.

“We’ll check Rawly’s, then.” Jack takes a notebook from his jacket and scribbles the name down with a black pen. “Make and model of the car?”

“It’s an Acura RLX,” Harry breaks in. “Cherry red.”

“Hard to miss,” Jack says.

“I talked him out of a corvette.” Ms. Ashcroft hasn’t taken a sip of her lemonade, but she holds the glass tightly. “Too flashy.”

Will wonders by the tightness of her mouth if she regrets having talked him out of something that would have no doubt brought him joy. It’s the normal thing grieving family members do, even if they’re the ones that murdered the victim. Old concerns and old arguments fritter to the wayside like dry leaves blowing into a forgotten ditch.

“And what time did your husband leave?” Jack asks.

“I think it was about seven. We’d eaten dinner. He said he wanted to meet Larry for a couple beers. Larry says he never made it.”

“And he left in his Acura. Was he going to pick anyone up on the way? Any other buddies?”

Ms. Ashcroft frowns. “No.”

“And did you stay home all evening?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the Friday lineup like around here?”

Ms. Ashcroft colors as she answers. “I like the Mystery station. I watched *Forensic Files,* and then *The First 48.”*

“Those are crime shows, right?” Jack asks.

“Yes.”

Harry barges in. “Is there a crime in watching crime television?”

“Not at all,” Jack says. “Where were you on Friday night, Mr. Ashcroft?”

“Watching the Wildcats game.”

“And smoking on the porch.” The way Ms. Ashcroft says it clues us all in on her disapproval. Harry scowls.

“Yeah. I smoked on the porch.”

“You saw him?” Jack asks Ms. Ashcroft.

“I could see him lighting up. I could see the cigarette end in the dark,” she says. “I was turning the TV and the lights off before bed, and I saw it.”

“So that would have been about ten?”

“Yes. Right after my shows ended.”

“Did either of you make any phone calls? Talk to anyone at all on Friday evening?”

“It was a quiet evening, Agents,” Ms. Ashcroft says with a tired sigh and a lift of her shoulders.

“Did Bill have any enemies? Anyone who was angry with him?”

“If it’s a serial killer, does it matter?” Harry growls. “Don’t serial killers pick victims when they have the opportunity?”

“Some,” Will says, and Harry jerks as if he’s forgotten Will’s in the room. “Some are very specific in their criteria, and will watch a potential victim for weeks before acting. We have months between each victim in this case. We’re not sure that it’s a serial killer, yet. We’re going to ask questions that can help us pinpoint what all of these people had in common.”

Harry stares at him. His eyes are a vibrant green, and right now they narrow as angrily as a cat’s. “Well, he sure as shit didn’t look like either of the other victims. What on God’s earth would he have in common with the other two?”

This is someone who has also been watching crime television.

“That’s what we aim to find out, sir,” Jack says.

“Well, I trust that the FBI can do a better job than Mosley,” Harry blusters. “There ain’t enough brain cells to go around in that office.”

Melinda’s eyes actually do roll, but Harry can’t see her.

Jack hefts himself to a stand. “Well, I’d like to thank you both for your time. When we have more information, we’ll call. If you should think of anything else that could be helpful to our investigation, let us know.” He passes out his cards. Will stands, adjusting his belt, and watches as Harry glares at the card while Melinda cups hers like it’s something precious.

Amanda reappears in the doorway. Must have been out in the hallway, listening. Melinda directs her to show the agents out.

“Can we have your name, please?” Will asks when they reach the entrance.

Amanda’s eyes drop away. “Amanda. Amanda Farley.”

“And were you working on Friday, Amanda?”

“I worked until 5 on Friday.”

“And have you seen any strangers hanging about, any strange cars driving past the house?”

Amanda gives a little shrug as she opens the front door. “I can’t say that I have.”

“What are the names of the farm hands who work here?” Jack asks. Will steps onto the front porch.

“Um, Big Ben Fryer and Paul Flannery.”

“And when are they on duty?”

“They split the week. Big Ben works Sundays through Thursdays, and Paulie works Tuesdays through Saturdays. They’re here at 6:30 and they leave at 1, dependin’.”

“Depending on what?”

“The work that needs’ to be done.”

“Have there been any arguments between them and Mr. Ashcroft?”

“None that I would know of, sir. They’ve been workin’ here years before I came along.”

“How long have you been working here?”

“Um.” Her eyes roll back as she thinks. “Eight months, I’d say.”

“And they treat you well?”

A shadow passes over her face before she answers, “They do, sir.”

Jack doesn’t say anything. Just stares at her. She flushes as she fiddles with the doorknob. “I think I hear Ms. Ashcroft ringing for me.”

Will certainly hadn’t heard a bell.

“Thank you, Ms. Farley,” Jack says.

They step off the porch and head for the car.

“What’d you get from all that?” Jack opens the driver side door.

“Ms. Ashcroft is no fan of her brother-in-law, but she tolerates him for appearances sake. And probably for peace within the family. They’re both concerned about Bill Ashcroft, but for different reasons, I think.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know. But somehow…I got the sense of relief mingled with guilt from both of them. And they don’t know that both of them feel the same way.”

Jack smirks. When they first started working together, he watched Will like a hawk. Watched how the younger agent operated, how he questioned a witness or prodded a suspect. When Will admitted he could pick up on people’s emotions as if they were a radio broadcast, Jack didn’t quite believe it. But over time, Will proved it.

“Relief. Sounds complicated.”

“Melinda Ashcroft is about keeping up appearances. She’s obsessed with status. Perhaps Bill didn’t live up to that.”

“And Harry?”

“Not sure. Could be something as simple as sibling rivalry. Arguments over the family business. A long-held feud between two brothers.”

“Do you think Ms. Ashcroft would tell us if we got her alone?”

“Appearances, Jack. She’s not likely to spill family secrets.”

“Figures. And the girl?”

“Nervous. I don’t think they’re mistreating her, though.”

“Unwanted overtures from the husband?” Jack muses.

“Could be.” Will slides into the passenger seat. “Maybe we can find out more from the farm hands.”

“Mm.” He’s checking his phone. “Let’s see if we can find them at the barn.”

Ben Fryer and Paul Flannery spoke in monosyllables and smelled like cigarettes. The Ashcrofts' pay was fair, no unknown cars had come down the road, no odd folks hung about. They'd never seen the brothers fight, and Melinda Ashcroft was "sweet as pie," though that last one was a stretch.

"They're circling the wagons," Will says to Jack.

They meet Deputy Zeller at the spot where Bobby Avery had parked his truck, and follow him into the Ashcroft woods.

The forest seems ominous. Will grew up in the mountain country of Virginia, in an old coal town like this one. Many of his dinners were self-caught from the river. The Appalachian woodland has been a refuge, a haven of beauty and order. Sure, ecology is messy, with its leaf litter and all the insects and fungus, but it behaves as Will expects it to. It's predictable in its chaos. Reassuring.

Yet this forest has an altogether different energy, like they're entering a crowded stadium for the home team. Thrumming excitement edged with hopeful caution. Crowded stadiums are not Will's recreation of choice. It feels dangerous, all those bodies shaken together like ice in a tumbler. The bright lights and jostling elbows make him uncomfortable, and the smell of overpriced beer and buttered popcorn make his stomach churn. Not to mention the concrete echoes with cheers and shouts that leave a punitive ringing in his ears for days.

Something about this wood is like that. It vibrates, it hums. Birds call to one another and a breeze tickles the leaves, and of course nothing's out of place about either of those things. Below it, moving like a dark underground river, something reminds Will of the manic frenzy of fans watching the clock.

"Ready?" Zeller says.

Jack nods. Will shoves the sense of foreboding away. Lets his hand linger by his belt where the gun hangs.

But it's not like whatever's here is something you can shoot.

He tries to shake that thought away.

The shade of oaks and hickories is a welcome respite from the noon sun. They pick their way through Japanese barberry and thickets of pawpaw as Zeller leads them uphill. The ground beneath their feet is dry, and what little plant life lies there is stamped down by the boots of the emergency personnel that have been there before them.

Zeller's company isn't necessary. Will can track. The boots of deputies and paramedics are obvious to anyone, even with an untrained eye.

There's something else, though, as the woodland loses its stadium-like sense of bedlam. In the following hush, Will stops paying attention to the footprints, mindlessly following the bark-brown of Zeller's vest ahead of them. He can't quite grasp what it is that makes this

woodland rave with a stadium's madness, only to go dead silent the further in. Even the birds and insects are quiet, as if sensing the approach of a predator.

Will pictures a fishing lure floating in the water. Here, now there, glinting in the midday sun. A fine line being drawn into a spool. A fisherman at the end. Waiting for his catch, net and cooler at his side.

What is it in the mountain that might swallow them up?

"Shit!" Jack jumps back, almost knocking Will over. "That plant just grabbed me!"

"I'm sorry?" Will beats back the urge to unholster his weapon.

"Ah, that one's called Devil's walking-stick," Zeller says, his foot up on the slope of a tree root and his hands on his belt. The expression on his face is smug, like he's some wise man of the woods explaining the nuances of the wild to befuddled city slickers.

And maybe that's the truth, but Will barely suppresses the urge to roll his eyes.

The shrub in question is taller than either of them, with reaching, pale brown branches twisting upward. What caught Jack were the thorns—each of the little bastards at least an inch long, and numerous. They could probably be used as golfing tees, or to dig someone's eyes out.

Jack rubs his shoulder. "Jesus Christ. It tore my jacket." His glare turns murderous.

"It's not our killer, Jack, let it go." Will knows this shrub from days of clambering through Virginia brush. Thorny fuckers, but nothing to shoot at.

Jack's glare shifts to Will. Deputy Zeller chuckles as he releases his Mountain Man pose and keeps heading up.

They're puffing by the time they reach the scene.

Hemlock trees open up to a tiny clearing edged with arcing barberry and leafy garlic mustard. A white flag marks a partial footprint in the ground in front of them. Zeller remarks, "We think it's Bobby Avery's."

More flags circle the base of a thick, old oak. Thick enough that if Jack and Will were to link hands and try to circle around the tree, they weren't likely to complete the chain.

Green ropes of kudzu still hang, stained a dark crimson. As Will lifts his head to observe the vines more closely, Bill Ashcroft appears. The victim's head is strapped to the trunk so his eyes lift to the sky, his mouth twisting in pain. His arms form the cross of a T, tied to the heavy branches of the tree, pulled so hard one of his shoulders was wrenched from the socket. Kudzu mingles with his entrails, threads through his ribs and his lungs. Ties his ankles to the tree in a macabre imitation of the crucifixion.

When Bill Ashcroft looked up to the sky, did he beg for God's forgiveness on behalf of his killer?

Movement in the branches snags Will's eye. It's a vulture, head bowed and curious eyes trained on them.

"Was he brought here and killed, or did it happen elsewhere?" Jack asks.

"Sheriff says there's not enough blood here for him to have been killed here," Zeller says.

Will's chest feels as though it might burst. "This is holy."

Zeller makes a noise. Jack waits.

"He was a sacrifice and a warning." The feeling grips Will like a vise to the rib cage, threatening to snap them into a pile of splinters. He presses one arm over his ribs, and draws in a lungful of air. "It's righteous. Angry. This is...defensive. Protective. Whoever did this thinks they're protecting someone...or something."

"Protecting what?"

"If I knew that, I'd say," Will grits through his teeth. It feels like fingers are pressing down behind his eyes. A migraine worming its way through his temples, heavy with...curiosity?

What the fuck? What is in my head?

"Are you getting sick on me?" Jack steps beside him. His question isn't kind, though. It's a warning. He doesn't want Will using his abilities in front of Zeller.

"Must be the heat," Will says. Sweat rolls down one temple. The skin under his back and arms feels clammy and gross. He whispers low enough for Zeller to miss, "We're being watched."

Jack lifts his chin and looks around.

"Not like that. You won't see it."

Will turns away so Zeller can't see his face. "Think about it, Jack. Crucifixion was about punishment, but it was also about warning others. You do what this person did, and you'll meet with the same fate." Louder, he says, "We need to know what Bill Ashcroft did. Who he offended. What crime he committed."

"Bill Ashcroft wasn't a criminal. A douchebag, sure, but he wasn't out committing crimes." Zeller scuffs his boot at the ground.

Will looks back up the tree where Ashcroft was hung. Nothing's there now, the hallucination gone. Now only the bloody blemish on the old oak's bark and the bloodstained kudzu remain.

"They should have taken the kudzu in for evidence," Will says.

Jack blinks.

Zeller looks at the tree, and back at Will. "We did. What kudzu are you seeing?"

Will looks again.

The kudzu vines are gone.

Chapter 3

“Places like this are why I ran for the city as soon as I emancipated myself from my parents.” Jimmy’s voice floats low over the table.

“No shit. This place is the pits,” Beverly says.

Will shrugs. “Scenery’s not bad.” He ignores the pull in his stomach. Leaving the scene of the crime was hard, like he’s a metal file fighting a magnet. Simultaneously, Will’s half-tempted to get into the car and drive as fast away from these mountains as he can. He still can’t quite shake off the feeling of being hunted.

“Well, at least you pass for straight,” Jimmy says. “I was born with the rainbow flag spillin’ out of my mouth and a matching crown.”

“Was that coming out of your ass?” Bev quips.

Jimmy flashes an outrageous grin at Bev. “You’re precious.”

Jack takes one bite of his pureed mashed potatoes and grimaces. “Do you think they’ve heard of spices here? Salt, at the very least?”

“Keep your voice down,” Will says. The eatery, *Betty’s,* is cafeteria tray style. Today’s offering is pork chops, mashed potatoes, steamed carrots, and blueberry pie. The pork chops are dry while the potatoes and carrots are too wet. Hope’s alive for the blueberry pie.

Regulars slouch in booths of blue formica and red vinyl. Eyes shift to the agents and away just as quickly. A sour faced white woman with a blonde beehive stands behind the hot pans of food, doling out portions with as much enthusiasm as a DMV agent handing out forms. A second woman in a white apron and pink tracksuit is wiping tables, chatting and smiling with customers.

“What have you two got so far?” Jack asks.

Bev swirls her carrots and potatoes together. Keeping her voice barely above a whisper, she says, “Well, he must have gone into hypovolemic shock and passed out before he died of blood loss. The actual slicin’ and dicin’ was done with a small, thin blade, like a scalpel or an x-acto. Blood, skin and hair samples have been sent out for testing, plus whatever we could scrape out from the fingernails.”

Jack stares at the cut of pork chop on his fork. “Not enough blood at the crime scene. It happened elsewhere.” His nose wrinkles.

“No,” Will says. “This was an altar. He would have been exsanguinated there. Maybe the killer took it with them.”

“The crucifixion didn’t occur at an altar,” Jack says.

“No, but the crucified form of Jesus is hung over enough of them.”

“Is the vic supposed to be Jesus now?”

The slightest hint of a headache starts behind Will’s right temple. “Not remotely.”

Beverly cuts in with a mouthful of carrots. “This time, the tongue is missing.”

“Another trophy,” says Jack.

“It’s weird how serial killers self-congratulate that way,” Jimmy says. “Nothing says a job well-done like the innards of some old white guy with a beer belly.”

“He went to a bar in the next county.” Jack pokes at his carrots. “Doesn’t give me full confidence in finding something good to drink around here.”

“You’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto,” Jimmy sing-songs.

“You know something I don’t?”

“Knox County is a dry county. Not a bar nor package store to be found.”

Beverly whips to face Jimmy as her fork lands with a loud clank on the plate. “James Terence Price, how could you keep this vital information from me?”

“Don’t you worry, I got you, buttercup.” Jimmy winks. “My man JD awaits us at the motel.”

Bev’s smile lights up her face, “I’m so sorry I doubted you.”

“I won’t hold it against you this time, my love. I know you were distressed.”

Jack makes a noise. “Don’t be surprised if I come knocking at your door tonight.”

“Kinky,” says Jimmy.

They’re interrupted by the white-aproned woman in the pink tracksuit. She’s probably sixty, with bright blue eyes and pink lipstick to match the tracksuit. “Can I get you some of our blueberry pie? It’s the best in town.” Her grin is electric white, like she’s had her teeth worked on extensively.

“Please,” Will says, desperate with the hope that it is the best in town, and that that means it’s flavorful and loaded with sugar.

“You got it, darlin’. Any other takers?”

“Yes, please,” Beverly says, and she lets her fork fall to the plate again.

Jimmy, who hasn’t touched any of the food, shakes his head no. Jack pushes his plate from him and echoes Beverly’s, “Yes, please.”

The server glances at the half-eaten food, but says nothing as she grabs all four plates, stacking them on the table and lifting the putrid tower of tasteless food up and away. “Three slices, coming right up.”

Beverly turns to her partner. “Jimmy, what else have you got packed in your car? I know you have the appetite of an elephant, so this is not like you.”

“Dieting. I’ll have to live on Luna bars this time around.”

“Luna bars and J.D. I might just do the same, depending on how this blueberry pie turns out,” Jack says.

“Here we are,” the woman announces as she arrives, plates balanced in both hands. “Hopefully this is to your taste.” Her smile is pinched.

They are not making any friends.

“Thank you,” Will says. “The food’s fine, we’re just in town to investigate the death of—”

“Bill Ashcroft. I know. We all know, hon.” She crosses her arms, her smile entirely fading.

Will tastes the words on his tongue before he speaks. He probably overthinks, but during an investigation he prefers to get under the skin of others, Sometimes that’s sliding in like a glass splinter, and at other times, it’s like sinking in like a bit of sweet-smelling lotion. “I know this must be a trying time, ma’am. My name’s Will Graham.”

“Will Graham. I’m Jolene Jackson.” She gestures to the glum woman standing behind the counter. “That’s my sister, Betty Fryer. This is her place.”

“The pie’s excellent,” Beverly says, a peace offering.

Jolene Jackson doesn’t look impressed.

“Fryer? Any relation to Ben Fryer?” Jack asks.

“Sure, he’s my nephew. Works on the Ashcroft farm. You spoke to him this morning.”

“That’s right. Seems like a fine young man, if of few words.”

“He’s turned out alright.”

“Did he ever mention any problems with his employer?”

“You thinkin’ he did it?”

“No, ma’am. Just trying to find out more about Mr. Ashcroft.”

Ms. Jackson leans in. “Mr. Ashcroft was a bully,” she whispers. “But that doesn’t mean he deserved that end.”

Will says, “I’m sure people in town are concerned.”

“Frightened, more like.” She straightens and settles her hands on her hips. “It’s not everyday someone gets murdered. He was murdered, right? Hung up in a tree?”

“Grapevine’s at work, huh?”

“Please, in a town this size?” Her eyes flash, and then she looks around. The cafe is dead quiet. Every eye is on them.

“Has Mr. Ashcroft publicly angered anyone?” Will asks.

She guffaws, just as Will predicted. “The Ashcrofts pride themselves in pissing others off. But there’s nothing special about that. Or them. They just have money.”

“Did they ever eat here?” Jack asks.

Ms. Jackson shakes her head. “Probably had their produce flown in from organic farms. They’re not like us.”

“Jolene!” Betty stands with her arms crossed, a ladle dripping mashed potatoes onto the floor. “I need you.” Her voice has the rasp of a lifelong smoker’s.

“Duty calls.” Ms. Jackson smirks. “Enjoy your pie, folks.” She drops the check on the table before hustling back to the kitchen.

Jimmy picks up his fork and steals a bite of Beverly’s pie. His eyes close in bliss. “Mmmm. This pie...fuck my diet, this pie just might save this town. Let’s get a whole one to go.”

The motel is about twenty minutes from the town. As Will steps out of the car and onto the gravel of the parking lot, movement in the shadows catches his eye.

A deer. A stag melts from the shadows of the trees, the rack spreading high from his head like a gargantuan crown. It turns down the road, streetlights glinting on its fur until its a black silhouette in a sulphuric glow, framed by the blackness of a nighttime landscape.

“Huh,” Will breathes. The temperature has fallen, and the sound comes out in a puff of fog.

“Got our keys,” Jack says, returning from the motel office. He tosses one key to Will, who hadn't heard him approach.

Nerves rattled, Will asks, “Did you see that?”

Jack glances around. “See what?”

Will looks back to the road. The stag has gone, leaving only the lonely stretch of road. Insects flock at the bulbs of the streetlights.

“Big buck. Impressive rack.”

Jack gives a lift of his shoulders, and takes his bag from the car.

That night as Will drifts to sleep, he thinks of the stag in the darkness, headed back to where the town of Fire Creek lays. Shapes play on the ceiling, as slippery and lithe as fish in a stream. As the shadows thicken, the stream turns red like blood washing away.

“So we’ve got three victims ritualistically killed and displayed, and have yet to figure out a way to tie them together. Does it still feel planned?” Jack dumps more sugar into his coffee.

“Yes. This isn’t opportunistic,” Will says.

“Who else is in trouble, then?” Deputy Brian Zeller asks. He’s got dark circles under his eyes and he clutches his coffee like someone might snatch it. “He’ll kill again, right?”

“That’s why we’ve got to find out what links them.” Will tips the coffee cup into his mouth, grimacing at the bitterness of the brew. Coffee shops are nonexistent in Fire Creek, and apparently the folks working at this sheriff’s office like their coffee dark and scathing.

Jack rubs one temple. “Katz and Price say Ashcroft was alive while he was being flayed. That takes real determination. Sadism.”

Zeller covers his face with one hand.

Will bites his lip.

They’ve spent two days here now, pulling phone records and cross-referencing calls, reading reports from local cops, and combing through the sites where each victim was displayed in a vain effort to recover potentially missed clues. Jack checked out Rawly’s and questioned the barkeep on Bill Ashcroft’s habits while Will interviewed Bill’s friend Larry Temple. No one had anything helpful to add to the investigation.

Which led them back to the other victims, and between the three scenes, they tried to build a working profile of the perpetrator.

“Let’s go over this one more time.” Jack taps a pen against his clipboard. “James Cooney was the twenty-six year-old son of Rayland and Temperance Cooney. Rayland owns a mountaintop removal company headquartered in Corbin, Kentucky. James worked at his father’s company, Cooney Energy, as a junior associate. He scouted potential places for strip mining, speaking with locals and generally glad-handing with community stakeholders. On February 28th, he missed a morning meeting with his dad, and was later found strung up on an ash tree at the edge of one of the company sites. Flayed and eviscerated. Liver gone.

“Madeleine Goddard’s works as a server at a diner called Annie’s. Madeleine, age thirty-five, was found strung up to another ash tree in Barbourville, Kentucky. Her own backyard. A neighbor spotted her.”

“Police reports described the scene as ‘gruesome,’ and ‘unprecedented,’” Deputy Zeller adds.

Will ignores him. “And even though it was mere months later, and it was similar to the murder of James Cooney, the two departments didn’t connect right away.”

“Despite the outrageousness of both crimes,” Jack says. “Once Madeleine’s body was released, her sister Phoebe Hanes had her buried. No public outcry for Madeleine’s killer, even.”

“Meanwhile, the Cooneys launched a campaign to bring their son’s killer to justice. It wasn’t until after Madeleine was buried that someone connected the two murders,” Will says. “Same MO. Flaying. Evisceration. Ash tree. Kudzu.”

And the murder sites of both James and Madeleine hummed with the same energy as the site that held the body of Bill Ashcroft. It had faded, but Will could still feel the sticky residue of someone correcting a wrong.

But what was the wrong?

And why kudzu and ash?

“Trophies,” Zeller says. “Some skin gone. James Cooney was missing his liver, Madeleine Goddard her kidneys, and Bill…his tongue.”

Will glances at Jack. He looks grey. One palm lies over his forehead, and his eyes are glazed over. They’ve worked together long enough for Will to know what that means.

“Did you take something?” Will asks, quietly.

“An hour ago,” Jack says.

“We’ve been at this all day. We’ve gotta be fresh for the Cooneys tomorrow.”

“Mm.” Jack doesn’t move.

“Jack.”

“Hm?”

“Go back to the motel. I’ll catch a ride with Bev and Jimmy.”

“Migraines, huh?” Zeller breaks in. “My grandma always gave us peppermint tea for headaches. Helps before they get too bad.” He looks Jack over. “Though it might be too late for you.”

Jack groans.

“Yeah, thanks, Deputy, that was helpful,” Will snipes. “Jack, go to bed.”

“I’ve got dinner comin’ to us tonight.” Zeller drops his file folder on the desk. “I sent out one of the other deputies to pick up some fast food. It might be a little cold by the time it gets here, but it’s the best we got around here. My treat.”

Will’s mouth goes dry at the thought of cold fast food, but honestly, it wouldn’t be the first time.

“Okay,” Jack says. The fast food talk probably reminded him of his acid reflux. “I’m out.”

“Good. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Jack gathers up his things, puts on a pair of shades, and salutes Will. Will returns it.

“He’s a bit of a workaholic, huh?” Zeller asks once Jack has departed.

Will raises his eyebrows. He won’t speak about Jack’s work ethic—it’s a dogged one. Jack will worry at a case like mice at the marrow of a calcium-rich skeleton in winter. But beyond that, he now has an added pressure with Bella’s cancer diagnosis, and the treatment that keeps her bone-tired and bone-thin.

They go back to the blissful quiet, each of them focused on their own tasks. The fast food arrives, and Will bites into a tepid burger with a cold bun, finishing off the fries despite their chilled gumminess.

By the time he finishes, he’s no closer to solving the case.

The moon hangs high in the black night. A single street lamp casts a yellowish glow across the frayed ribbon of road. The cool air and the quiet desolation of the town gives rise to a nostalgic feeling in Will, who remembers nights in his youth with a clove cigarette on his lip and a Smirnoff Ice in hand. He had few friends, always being more of a loner, but under a night sky outside the luminescent circle of lamp light, he felt as though he belonged to something larger than himself. Larger than the people who surrounded him in his daily life. Something ancient. Something numinous.

Just as the reminiscent scent of clove slips into his nose, a rustle to his left pulls him from his thoughts. He follows the source of the sound to see a large shadow slip from the lamp light and into the darkness by the side of the road. As his eyes adjust to the dark, he can make out the eight points and shaggy ruff of a large buck.

“Shit, they grow big around here,” he mutters. Could it be the same buck as the one he saw by the motel?

The buck lifts his head and watches him. Big, black eyes like two fathomless wells. Something about it seems unusual. It’s so calm, for one. But the eyes. Even in this dim lighting, they seem eerie. Too large, and too black.

Without thinking about it, Will takes a few steps forward. The buck watches. Doesn’t move, doesn’t seem especially concerned.

“Hey,” Will says, softly. It’s stupid, he knows. Those antlers are weapons.

The buck looks toward the hills beyond the town’s edge, and back at Will.

“You must know it ain’t hunting season, huh?”

The buck flicks an ear. Then he turns, hooves silent against the ground, and heads for the hill.

Will finds himself following, curious to see what the buck will do. He plans to just follow him to the edge, just beyond the street, to the grass that stretches below the edge of forest on the hillside. The buck doesn’t seem bothered, just strides along at a steady pace.

Just as Will reaches the grassline, a sulfurous glow in the treeline snags his sight. It moves.

“Hello?” Will calls.

The light moves again. Someone steps out, holding a lantern aloft. It’s a strange lamp—not the electric kind. Something older, like one of those carbide lamps seen in museums.

In the light of the lantern, Will can trace a boy's face with dark circles beneath his eyes. The boy wears a miner's hat and overalls, but Will can't tell much else about him. He might be no more than twelve. The corners of his mouth turn downward, and he stares at Will with large, dark eyes. Eyes like the stag's.

"Hey. Are you alright?" Will asks.

The boy lifts his hand in a 'come here' gesture.

Will glances back at the town. Nothing moves. No one else is out.

When he looks back the boy is still beckoning him. The air around him seems to blur like a fog. An eerie sense of wanting, longing, emanates from the boy's expression.

"Are you alone? Do you need help?"

The boy turns, still holding his lantern, and sinks into the shadows of the brush. The lantern kicks up strange shadows dancing and sliding along the treeline.

"Shit." Will takes one last glance at the town behind him.

Then he lopes up the hill and into the bushes.

The lantern bobs ahead of him like the will-o-wisps of his childhood storybooks. He uses his phone to light the darkness directly ahead of him, but still finds himself tripping over roots and ducking low branches lest one scrape his face. The boy has melted into the darkness, but the lantern shines bright, moving further and further.

"Hey! Hey!" Will shoves through bushes that scratch at his arms. "Wait up!"

He stumbles into an opening in the woods. Moonlight pours through the gap in the canopy. His chest heaves like he's run a marathon. How long has he been running?

A wild glance around reveals no boy and no lantern. But at the edge of the small meadow, the stag emerges, black eyes steady on Will.

Will's clutches his phone tightly. The stag lowers his head, his nose almost touching the ground. For a moment, Will pictures the stag charging him, goring the soft of his stomach. The black eyes swallow moonlight as blood spills to the ground in rivulets of the darkest rubies. The soil, the coal-veined Kentucky clay, wants his blood, craves it, gets fed by it and grows a tall canopy where a vigilante hangs his kills. Sacrifice and punishment. Sustenance and renewal.

Then the stag stands tall again, startling Will from his vision. The animal watches him calmly before it steps back into the ink-black darkness of the forest.

"Shit, shit, shit." Alarm rings in his chest, flushes heat behind his ears. He needs to get back to town. Spinning on his heel, he crashes through the brush in a direction that seems downward but quickly plateaus. After a few minutes of walking, nothing looks the same.

“I’m a fucking tracker,” he says, furious. But there are no broken twigs, no footprints to follow, no sign of him having walked here. Even when he tries to backtrack, he finds nothing.

He checks his cell. No service.

Was the stag and the boy even real? Did he imagine the whole thing?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This hasn’t happened since he was a kid, not in the woods anyway. Water is a whole other thing. Things lurking in the murky depths of a cold stream frighten him more than anything. Shapes with spindly wet fingers, mouths with too many teeth, and bloated limbs. No one else saw what he saw. It was all part of his affliction, he’d decided. As a teen, he considered he might have schizophrenia. It never seemed in his best interest to admit to the things he saw, though he wondered if his dad could guess. Beau Graham would sometimes watch Will with a soft, pitying look. Whenever Will proved himself to be remarkably perceptive with people, Beau laughed and said Will was just like his momma.

As for the woods, well, sometimes he thought he saw things or heard things, but only as a kid. He’d made his peace with the woods, or so he thought. They were a refuge for a teenager like him.

What’s different now? Is it the case? Brought him out to the edge of southern civilization, and now he’s cracking?

It’s getting hard to breathe. He needs to calm down. Checks his phone again. Still no service. Swallows and looks at the canopy overhead. Faint moonlight speckles the leaves. No stars. If he continues crashing around like he's been doing, he’s likely to walk right into Devil’s Walking Stick and slash himself to bits. He needs to exercise care. Deliberation.

He picks his way over ferns and small, woody plants, wending his way through the trees. The thought that he might not be headed in the right direction crosses his mind, but he shakes it away, careful to continue downhill. The mountains sheltered the town. At the very least, he’ll hit a road. He can follow that back to town.

That’s when he sees the light again. Steady. Unmoving. Ahead of him. A yellow beacon in the dark.

“Hey!” he shouts. “Help!”

The wind lifts through the trees, sending the leaves in waves of whispering.

“Listen,” someone says.

Will freezes.

“Listen. ” It comes again. Soft, raspy. Eldritch.

Shivers run up Will’s spine. “Who’s there?”

A repeating chorus of ‘listen’ rises like frogsong in spring, cacophonous and fervent.

Will fumbles for his gun, pulling it out, keeping it by his side as he spins around, trying to see someone, watching the shadows flicker with the breeze as the whispers become shouts.

"Listen, listen, listenlistenlistenLISTenLISTENLISTEN—"

CRASH.

Branches snap and break. Something large tumbles in the undergrowth.

SNAP. CRASH.

Whatever it is, it's headed for him.

Will takes a step back. Unholsters and raises his gun.

CRASH.

He takes another step back. His heel catches on the crook of a root. He reels backwards. The ground inclines sharply, and Will shouts as he finds himself sliding down, chunks of soil and rocks cascading with him, sharp sticks catching and tearing his clothes.

He lands hard against forest floor. It knocks the breath from him. His hands are empty; neither phone nor gun made it with him. He scrambles across the leaf litter in a frantic search.

Until a dark shape looms overhead and light fills the forest, so bright Will has to block it from his eyes. At the periphery of his vision, something rises, something elephantine and horrifying. It can see him. It sees him.

Will braces himself for the attack.

Chapter 4

“Are you alright?” A gravelly voice cuts through the chaos.

The blinding light is a flashlight. Someone stands on the ridge above him with a flashlight.

Will throws his arms up to shield the light from his eyes, trying to catch sight of who holds the beam. “Who’s there?” he puffs. Then it hits him; his ankle holster. How could he forget? He reaches down—

“Hold it.” The voice is sharp now. “I have a rifle pointed at you. You’re trespassing on my land. Declare yourself.”

Will balls his fist. “I’m Agent Will Graham of the FBI. I can show you identification.” He curses himself for the creakiness in his voice.

Silence first. Then a chuckle rises into the air like a breeze. “Well, Agent Will Graham, I never expected to find the FBI in my backyard.” The stranger’s accent is odd. Not quite Kentucky south, though there’s a hint of that. No, this man’s spent time overseas.

“I...got lost.”

“Clearly.” The light points to the ground, no longer blinding him. “I can help you find your way.” The man keeps his rifle in the crook of his arm, but it's no longer aimed at Will. “Stay where you are. The ground is unfamiliar to you.” He moves carefully, deliberately half-sliding on his feet down the ridge where Will fell. Debris slides with him, but not nearly as much as when Will took his tumble.

When the stranger reaches Will, he leans close. “Here. Take my hand.”

Will takes it. The stranger’s grip is warm and callused. Strong. He’s near enough that Will catches a whiff of aftershave. Something warm curls in his chest, like a cat finding a patch of sunlight. He’s at a loss for words as the stranger lifts him onto his feet.

“Anything hurt?” the stranger asks.

“No. Well, except maybe my pride.” His cheeks heat. “I, um, had a phone, and a gun.”

The man shines his light on the ground until they recover Will’s things.

“My home is only over this ridge,” the stranger says. He’s taller by a couple inches, and broader in the shoulders and arms. The darkness hides any telling features, like the shape of his nose or the color of his hair. “Allow me to invite you in. You’re bleeding.”

“Thank you.” Will rubs his neck, scratches beneath his collar. “Where?”

The stranger either doesn’t hear him or ignores him and leads the way over the ridge using his light to find secure footholds. Gun holstered once more, Will follows. It’s only a couple

yards high, but it'd seemed longer than that when he fell, as if a crevasse had opened and swallowed him, tumbling him into that proverbial handbasket to hell.

The steady light that Will had seen earlier appears. It's the square glow of a lamp framed by a window. The stranger leads around the corner of a cabin, and alarm shrills along Will's skin when he sees figures in the bushes. Or, are they figures? Does someone stand there? They're so still, like mannequins crouched among the greenery. Is this an ambush?

The stranger's gone ahead, paused at the bottom of the steps to the porch.

Will touches his hand to his gun, nervousness skittering beneath the surface of his skin. "Uh, what's your name?"

"Hannibal Lecter." The man turns to face him. Will sees him for the first time in the soft golden glow of the porchlight, and it makes his breath hitch. Hannibal's cheekbones protrude in sharp cliffs, casting long shadows onto a beautiful curve of jaw. His lips are thin but well-shaped, and his eyes seem to shine like amber.

Will coughs and turns his face away. The figures haven't moved. Garden statues? Hallucinations?

A sharp bark emits from the other side of the door. Hannibal chuckles, low and fond. "That's Nyx. She's gentle." He opens the door and the warm light of the inside pours onto the porch. It swallows the man up as he enters, and Will can do nothing but silently follow, hand still on his holster.

He takes one last glance over his shoulder before the door. The figures remain unmoved, just outside the circle of light.

He faces the door again and steps over the threshold.

A black lab greets him with a snuff at his knees, pink tongue rolling out, tail wagging fiercely. Will places his palm up for the dog to investigate. She gives him a sniff and a lick, and fixes him in place with adoring dark eyes.

There's no suppressing his smile, some his alarm eased. Will's loved dogs his entire life. If he didn't have the job he does, he'd adopt a whole pack of them.

"She's a terrible guard dog, but a wonderful companion," Hannibal says.

Will finds himself blushing again, and keeps his head bowed in the act of petting the dog. "I can see that."

"If you wouldn't mind removing your shoes."

Will complies, toeing off his oxfords. It's amazing he still has both. "Are those...statues, out there?"

"I do have several standing around the yard. Apologies if they alarmed you."

"They were surprising."

"And yet you walked past them, like the heroes of old strolling past the gatekeepers of hell." Hannibal hums to himself, hanging his brown jacket on a hook.

“I appreciate you helping me out.” Will scans his surroundings.

The inside of the cabin isn’t at all what he expected. It's an open floor plan, first of all, with the kitchen located to the left and back of the cabin, complete with an island and beautifully polished wood cabinets. A dining table sits to the left of the door, made of a deep, dark wood, and hemmed by matching dining chairs. The cream colored cushions look more comfortable than any pillow Will's lain his head on.

The living room area expands to the right of the door. The furniture is sleek and modern, like it’s from an IKEA catalog for the ridiculously wealthy. Leather chairs lean across from each other. The coffee table is cut from a tree trunk, a flat slab with finely sanded organic edges. The honey-warm wood paneling and the braided rugs make it homey. But the gorgeous, wide hardwood flooring and the antler chandeliers--one over the coffee table, and another over the dining table--make the place stylish. A large, stone fireplace prevails over the center of the room, a mirror over the mantle reflecting Will's disheveled self.

He ignores it, knowing it's too late to do anything about his appearance. Instead, large paintings on the walls draw his gaze. They're exquisite, with long sweeps of brilliant color against the darkest shadows, each depicting a scene of humans in natural landscapes. It smacks of High Renaissance art, perhaps painted in oils or tempera.

“Are you hungry?” Hannibal interrupts Will’s gawking.

“Uh. No. Thank you. I, um. I actually ate before I got lost in the woods.”

“Your clothes are quite dirty, and I’m afraid you have some tears in them. I can put them in the wash while you shower, if you’d like.”

“Um, actually, I’d like a lift into town. If you wouldn’t mind. My partner is expecting me back at our motel. He’ll worry if he doesn’t hear from me.”

Hannibal’s lips purse. Instantly, Will wishes he hadn’t been rescued by someone so good looking. It’s bad enough he’s made a fool of himself by getting lost in the woods while on an investigation. Now he gets to be an idiot in front of this striking enigma.

“I’m afraid I began working on my engine today, and it’s still in pieces.” Hannibal glances out the window, where outside is pitch black. “In the morning light, I can put it back together, and then I’d be happy to drive you back into town. Or, to your motel if you prefer.”

Will’s hand flexes. As attractive as this man is, the idea of spending the night out here in the middle of nowhere with a stranger who could very well be the serial killer they’re looking for does not sound like a smart idea.

“I have a landline. Cell service is nonexistent out here.” Hannibal points to a phone on his kitchen counter. “If you would like to call your partner and tell him where you are.”

Oh. “Yes. Please.”

"Shall I take your coat?"

Will nods, pulls off his coat, and hands it to Hannibal.

While Hannibal hangs the coat and then crouches beside Nyx and talks softly, Will makes his way to the phone. He dials the motel. Jack left with the beginnings of a migraine, so he doesn’t want to call his room directly. Instead, he leaves a message with the front desk. One that doesn’t involve him getting lost in the woods. He notices Hannibal cooks largely with cast iron, but he also keeps copper pots, and all of the appliances are stainless steel.

With his phone call done, he turns to face Hannibal.

“A shower, perhaps?” Hannibal asks. He stands straight up now, beside the dining table. There is the slightest upturn in the corners of his mouth, and a soft shine in his eyes. *Shit. He is handsome.*

“Um. If you wouldn’t mind?” Will reaches up, mussing his curls. “I really appreciate you helping me out like this. I don’t mean to crash your night.”

Hannibal’s lips twitch. It’s like the man smiles without actually smiling. “Let’s say you’ve provided me with more excitement than I normally experience. I’ll show you to the bathroom.”

Will follows Hannibal down the hall to the most exquisite bathroom he’s ever seen in someone’s home. Riverstone hummocks across the floor, and slate tiles the tub and the walls. The sink is porcelain and the taps are copper.

Hannibal shuts the door, leaving Will alone, and he finally deflates, the air hissing from him like a balloon.

It’s been one helluva day.

He surveys the shower. When he finally turns the copper tap and cranks the handle, water pours from the ceiling like a steady rainfall.

“Jesus.” After the temperamental boiling-hot-or-ball-shrinking-frigid showers at the motel, this is a thing of tremendous beauty. Like seeing the Rocky Mountains for the first time, or Niagara Falls.

Will strips quickly, discovering a nasty gash on his thigh along with plentiful scratches on his arms and legs. A rap at the door startles him.

“May I take your clothing and place it in the washer?” Hannibal asks.

“Yeah, hang on.” Will balls up his clothes, his underwear at the center, and slips it through the door. Had Hannibal been standing outside this entire time? “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.” Hannibal sounds as if he truly is taking pleasure in all this. The gravel of his voice makes Will’s dick take notice, and there’s no room for that kind of distraction so Will steps into the shower with the intention of cleansing his body and his thoughts.

The water is hot, soothing aches and wiping away the frustrations of the day. It stings his wounds, but the sensation is more thrilling than bothersome. The rainfall effect is pleasant, and it’s all Will can do to muffle his moans of contentment. Eventually, he reaches for the soap and suds up his torso and limbs.

His dick is half-hard.

There’s no time. It would be rude to spend too long in a stranger’s shower. What if he has limited hot water?

Though it’s obvious Hannibal’s wealthy enough to put some mechanism in place to ensure he has plentiful hot water.

No. Frowning at himself, he rinses the soap from his body, twists the tap, and steps out.

On the toilet is a folded set of pajamas. Black with red cording. On the back of the door hangs a soft, white bathrobe.

Will stares, his libido cooling. At some point, Hannibal entered the bathroom and placed those things there. He looks at the shower behind him. The waist-high stone wall would have hidden the bottom half of him, but still, Hannibal would have seen his private moment of bliss in the glory of the man’s fancy rain shower.

Will wipes his face with the towel. Maybe to Hannibal, that sort of thing isn’t a big deal. He seems rather…European. Though, to be living out here? Presumably alone? Will hasn’t seen anything to suggest someone else lives here other than Nyx.

Will pulls on the pajamas, which are softer than anything he's worn and obviously well-made. It’s while he pulls the nightshirt over his head that it occurs to him: he can’t *read* Hannibal Lecter.

He pauses, shirt only half on.

He can read most people. Take one look at them and know how they’re feeling. It’s helped him to adjust his behavior to suit their moods, but sometimes it’s gone too far, or he’s gone too far. He finds himself spitting out facts about the person’s thoughts and feelings—often thoughts and feelings they had no intention of sharing. His perceptiveness creeps them out.

Creeps dates out, too.

But Hannibal Lecter? He might as well be a blank space. An automaton.

It can't be. It's so out of this world. Will must've just been distracted. He's also hallucinating apparently, unless the pre-teen with a lantern was just a local kid playing tricks on him.

But what about the whispers?

listenlistenlisten—

That's it. He'd been discombobulated and scared when Hannibal came upon him. It's no wonder he couldn't— *didn't* —read him.

Will finishes pulling on his shirt, scrubs one hand over his face and over his beard. *Okay. Just relax.*

He slides into the bathrobe, takes his guns and badge from the sink, and steps into the hallway.

The door across the way is open. Inside, he can see Hannibal pushing a pillow form into a white case.

"Feeling better?" Hannibal asks, again with that irritating hint of a smile. Will heats up at the thought of Hannibal in the bathroom while Will thoroughly enjoyed his shower. How did he ever become an FBI agent? He was so out of it he didn't hear a door open?

The fall must've shaken all the sense out of him. "Yeah. Yes. Thank you. I can't thank you enough—"

"It really is no trouble." Hannibal fluffs the pillow at the head of the bed. "I'm afraid this is the only bed in the house. You'll sleep here tonight. I've changed the sheets for your comfort."

"What? Oh. No. No, I can't—"

"It is my pleasure, Will," Hannibal says, again in that rich, sincere tone. "The sofa is very comfortable, and I plan to stay up late reading. To read by the fire would be a blessing after a long day of work."

"I...I don't want to put you out."

"I insist." Hannibal gestures to the bed. "It will do you good to have a restful night's sleep, I suspect."

"Um. Thank you. Again." Will releases his senses, just a little, like an unfurling tendril of awareness.

And meets a blank space. As if Hannibal doesn't exist.

Hannibal's expression changes to one of curiosity. "Are you alright, Agent Graham?"

Will glances around the room. One wall is barred with shelves, and on the shelves sit a variety of pots. Most of the pots are carved with scenes, like modern-day Greek vases. Will

swallows hard against the question he wants to ask— *why can't I read you?* Scrambling for something to say, he blurts, "You have quite the art collection here."

"Do you appreciate art?"

"Yeah. Probably about as much as the next guy." *You're real. Aren't you real?*

Is Will hallucinating again?

Hannibal huffs a small laugh. "I presume with an occupation such as yours, you have little time for artistic pursuits."

"Yeah." Unease slithers in his gut. "Don't get to too many museums, or any sip-and-paints."

"That is too bad." Hannibal bows his head, a soft lock of brown--maybe blond?--hair falling over his forehead. "I've left a glass of water on the bedside table. If you need anything else, please let me know. I shall be happy to provide it."

"You're really too kind. Thank you." Will steps into the bedroom, and Hannibal slips past him to the doorway. Will can feel the man's body heat. *He's got to be real. This is too grandiose to be a hallucination. Isn't it?*

"Sleep well, Agent Will Graham," Hannibal says.

"You too." Will shuffles his feet as Hannibal leaves, his broad back eclipsed by the closing door.

Will turns to face the room and holds in a groan. The last thing he needs is to be suffering an affliction from his ability. And if Hannibal is real, the last thing he needs is to be ogling his benefactor. Especially in a place like Fire Creek, Kentucky. Stranded out in the woods. Who knows what he thinks of gay men.

Though, looking around the room, Hannibal Lecter doesn't seem like your stereotypical mountain man.

Will gets under the covers and lays back on the pillow, trying to squash his panic. The sheets are divine, smooth and cool. It's so good, it's enough to make him groan. Traces of cologne linger in the air and perhaps also shampoo? Will can picture Hannibal going about his mornings, though what man living on his own out in the middle of the woods bothers to put on cologne?

Apparently the ones you hallucinate.

Hallucination or not, the little throb behind his eyes tells him he better get to sleep before his own migraine hits. It's no good panicking, and thinking about the case won't help. Instead, he'll let himself have sweet thoughts. Like, if he had his own little cabin in this gorgeous landscape, he'd shower outdoors in the sun with the trees waving overhead. He'd never wear cologne and probably wouldn't even shave. He keeps his beard trim now, but without the FBI job he'd let it thicken and lengthen. Maybe take shears to it now and again so it didn't get in

the way. When his curls got unruly, he'd yank them back with an elastic. Spend his days playing with his dogs.

But he's got to make a living. And he's good at what he does. This fantasizing is a pipe dream.

Will exhales a loud, long sigh, and turns his head over into the pillow.

Will wakes to the sound of a muted thud in the distance. At first, the unfamiliar room disorients him, the ceiling a canopy of gleaming wood and the shelves of incredible vases too confusing to contemplate. And then he remembers.

Hannibal.

Whispers in the woods. A stag. The boy with the lantern.

He pounds his head against the pillow.

Wait.

His watch tells him it's 6:55 a.m.

"I slept the whole night?" He doesn't remember a single nightmare. No visions. No wakeful fits of tangled emotions and hot sweats.

The sharp *thud* sounds again. Someone's chopping wood.

Will gets up and wanders to the window, parting the white sheers.

In the sun, Hannibal swings an ax, splitting a log with a practiced blow. Perspiration stains his thin white t-shirt; the fabric sticking to the mounds of his pecs and shoulders. His hair, which Will was unable to determine the color of the night before, is a light ash-blond pushed back from his sweat-shiny aquiline features. With a broad and muscular body, the man is mouth-watering as he sets up another log. Then he points his chin to the sky, pausing to bask in the morning sunlight.

When he swings the ax overhead again, Will's eye catches on the trail of bare skin where Hannibal's shirt lifts. The guy's solid. He doesn't have the tapered waist and narrow hips of a model. He's brawny and thick and somehow god-like. And Will can't *stand it.*

With a hard swallow, he steps back from the window, willing his erection to ease. It's tempting to pull one off into the toilet, but it seems crass. Especially considering his host's generosity in accommodating an uninvited guest.

Will pads into the bathroom to find his clothes hanging on the back of the door. He showers quickly, rubs some toothpaste against his teeth with a finger, rinses, and spits. As he takes his clothes down and pulls them on, he discovers that the tear in his pant leg has been sewn.

"Jesus." As if the guy could get any more perfect. The matching scrape on Will's thigh doesn't bother him any more, but he bets if it were deep, Hannibal would've sewn that up too.

When he exits the bathroom, the scent of cooking food fills the air. The daylight pours into the large window, and the gentle, airy glow of the living space is warm and inviting.

Will enters the kitchen area to find Hannibal with wet hair and fresh clothes, frying up eggs and sausage over his stove.

Will keeps his eyes on Hannibal's face, not letting them trace the outlines of Hannibal's fit body. "Hi."

Hannibal smiles with that soft, almost-not-a-smile way he has. "Will. Good morning. I hope you like eggs and sausage."

"I do. Thanks." He eyes a chair at the island counter. Sturdy. Probably handmade. Then, he lets his awareness creep, trying to read his benefactor's mood without looking at the man himself.

Hannibal is exuding…warmth. Geniality. Beneath it, a quiet current of curiosity.

Will releases a sigh of relief. He *can* read Hannibal. "You showered?"

Hannibal actually does smile then. It makes him look younger, and less grave. Will's stomach flips. "I doused myself with the hose. It's quite refreshing."

The hose. Will rolls on the balls of his feet, trying to gather his dignity as a grown man. "Listen, I really want to thank you for taking me in and helping me out. And sewing my pants. You've really done far too much."

Hannibal pauses and looks Will over from head to toe. "I'm glad you've enjoyed yourself here. I'm always happy to help a man of the law."

Will just dumbly nods, his mouth watering as Hannibal plates the food. After a long moment, he asks, "So, um, you're not going to ask why I'm here in your neck of the woods?"

"I assume you're investigating the death of Bill Ashcroft." Hannibal places the plates at the place settings on the table.

"I am."

"And how did that bring you to my woods in the night?" Hannibal asks, face pulled into an expression of amusement.

Will sits at one of the settings, his eyes trained on the sharp tines of the fork lying there. "Well, I saw a boy in the woods."

"A boy?"

"Yeah. He was holding a lantern. Like, one of the old ones, a carbide lamp." He decides not to mention the stag. "He...he waved at me. I thought he needed help. So I followed him into the woods. Got lost." He shakes his head. "I can't believe I got lost."

“Mm.” Hannibal takes a bite of sausage. “Perhaps the boy was playing a prank.”

“Maybe.” The boy’s look had been haunted. Tired. Not a glint of mischief to be found. “It was…”

Hannibal pauses in his chewing. Looks expectantly at Will.

“It was weird, that’s all. The kid even had on a miner’s cap.”

Hannibal resumes chewing, swallows. Will takes his first bite.

“Mmm. This is… This is delicious.”

Hannibal smiles. It’s the biggest one yet, lighting up the honey brown of his eyes, crinkling them at the corners. “I’m delighted.”

In a still bleary haze, Will drags his feet toward Hannibal's truck. "How early do you get up? You put the engine back together, chopped wood, and made breakfast? Did you not sleep well on the sofa?" He can't help the sensation of being watched from the woods, but he keeps his eyes on Hannibal's handsome profile.

"I never need much sleep and I wake early." Hannibal tips his face to meet Will's eyes.

Will cuts his gaze to the ground until he's faced with the passenger side of a blue Ford pick-up.

The drive back into town is mostly dirt road, making the truck judder and jolt. Hannibal drives slowly, dodging the worst of the divots and holes in the lane.

The inside of the truck smells of cedar.

"Did you grow up here?" Will asks, wondering how much more he can learn about Hannibal in the short drive down the mountain.

"I did." Hannibal glances at him. "You have questions."

Will huffs a laugh. "Your house is practically an art museum. Sorry, but that's unexpected in a town like this one." He pushes back his curls, bemoaning their slightly frizzed state. "You're also...well, you don't seem like a product of the school system here."

"I'm not. My parents homeschooled me." His fingers tap, and then settle on the steering wheel. Long fingers with slender knuckles. Veins criss-cross the backs of his hands. Dressed in a buttoned shirt, jacket, and jeans, Hannibal looks long and lean. Broad shouldered, still, but no one could truly guess at the musculature hiding beneath.

Will pulls his eyes away, telling himself off for ogling. "Your parents still in the area?"

"They died eight years ago. It was a car crash."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"So long as we love and remember our lost ones, they are never truly gone." He shifts gears. "They left me the cabin, the land, the art within. I've added my own works. I have no need to leave this place."

Will peers out the window onto the passing fields. They've emerged from the forest and the road has flattened into pavement. "It's beautiful here."

After a moment, Hannibal asks, "Do I detect a West Virginia accent?"

"Born and raised."

“Do you have family there?”

“It was just me and my dad growing up. In a town a little bigger than this one. He’s still there.”

“Your mother wasn’t in the picture?”

Will shrugs one shoulder. “Didn’t think it was important enough to stay, I guess.” His dad never said a bad word about her. Spun tales about her to Will, tales of magic and whimsy. As a child, Will imagined she was a selkie, and his father gave her her coat and off she went into the nearby river to live out the rest of her life in its mysterious depths. It sounds better than she just decided to up and leave.

“I don’t mean to pry.”

“It’s...it’s not a sob story. It is what it is.” He summons a smile to share with Hannibal. “My dad was great. He is great. And even though we were poor, he always made sure I had enough to eat and clothes to wear. More than that, we had a lot of fun together.” Practice shooting at cans in the backyard. Hide-and-seek in the underbrush. Board games at night by kerosene lamps. And Will's favorite: trips to the library on weekends.

Hannibal turns onto the main road. “What made you decide on the FBI?”

The brick and clapboard buildings of Fire Creek’s downtown recline on the horizon, beyond wide fields and fences. “I went to college on a scholarship. Criminal justice. I was probably a little too fascinated by true crime shows when I was growing up, you know? Then I went on to get a Masters in criminal psychology.” He scratches behind his ear. No way was he going to tell Hannibal about his little talent. His ability to see through the eyes of the killer, his acute perception of people and their motives. He’d almost fallen into the FBI by accident. “An adjunct professor who consulted with the FBI introduced me to some people. I’d ended up talking to some bigwig and apparently he was impressed. Told me I should be at Quantico.”

Now here he is, in his third year as a field agent.

It’s not long before Hannibal pulls out onto the highway in the direction of the motel. Before they reach it, he pulls off into a side road. “Indulge me, if you will. The best coffee in the area is over here.”

They pull into the driveway of a large pink house with white trim. A wooden sign hanging from a chain on a white post advertises *Rose Cottage B&B*. The letters curl with a flourish, lined in black and gilded with gold. “This place serves people who aren’t customers?”

“They do.” Hannibal parks. “I imagine your coworkers will appreciate your offering, should you choose to get coffee for everyone.”

Will chuckles. “It really does pay to get to know the locals of any place you visit.”

When they get out of the car and to the front door, it swings open to a familiar face with loud, red curls. Blue eyes bounce quickly between them. “Morning, Hannibal. Morning, Agent Will Graham. You boys here for coffee?”

“If you please, Ms. Jackson. You’ve met Agent Graham, then?”

“Where else would he and that pack of suits go to eat in Fire Creek?” Jolene Jackson winks and beckons them in. *“Betty’s* is all there is, and I’ve had the pleasure of serving them.” She calls over her shoulder as she heads for a credenza topped with carafes, sugar packets, and small silver pitchers of what’s presumably cream.

“Are there more agents than you and your partner?” Hannibal asks.

“Forensics.”

“How many coffees then, handsome?” Jolene’s eyes twinkle as she faces them with a carafe in hand.

“Uh, four, please.”

“And one for you?” She says to Hannibal.

“I would be delighted, thank you.”

“I’ve got the to-go cups in the pantry. Be back in a jiffy.” She leaves them to stand in the foyer as she disappears down the hall.

“Friend of yours?” Will asks.

“Ms. Jackson knew me as a boy. I was a bit of a rascal before I attained the natural charm you see before you today.”

“Ah. Course.” Will faces away from the man to hide his smile, pretending to examine a painting of hydrangeas. The wallpaper is green ivy.

“I can’t imagine there’s a lot of traffic for this place,” he murmurs.

“Tourists looking to visit the Cumberland Gap, mostly. Regulars. Ms. Jackson runs a splendid business with a most delicious breakfast included. She serves coffee and cakes to the rest of us.”

When Jolene returns with a compostable tray of coffees, Will relieves her of it with a thank you. “How much do I owe you?”

“I put it on Hanni’s tab.” Mindless of Will’s gaping mouth, she hands a paper bag she had tucked under one elbow to Hannibal. “Your favorite.”

“You’re too good to me, Ms. Jackson.”

“And don’t you forget it.” She reaches up and pats his cheek.

Will manages to speak. “Hannibal, but you’ve already done enough—”

Hannibal puts up one hand. “I insist. Bill Ashcroft was my neighbor. The least I can do is caffeinate the man who may uncover his killer.”

“Oh, you put us all to shame, Hannibal," Jolene says. "I’ll do you one better. Agent Graham, you and your team can come here for free coffee anytime.”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am, but I don’t—”

“Now don’t fret, hon, you just come to me for coffee.” She rubs his arm and flashes him a big grin.“You come anytime.”

“T-thank you,” Will says as Hannibal guides him to the door. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Bye now! And Hannibal Lecter, you best visit more often!”

“It would be a pleasure, Ms. Jackson,” Hannibal calls over his shoulder and shuts the door.

After they climb into the truck, Will takes a sip of one of the coffees. “Oh. Huh. You’re right. This is the best coffee by far. We should’ve stayed here instead of the motel.”

When they pull up to the front of the motel, Hannibal pushes the clutch into park, and the engine purrs softly. Will grips the fabric of his pants and turns slightly to face the man who saved him from a cold overnight in the woods—and possible death, since being lost in Appalachia is no small thing. “You’ve been tremendously kind.”

“If there is one thing the south prides itself on, it’s good hospitality.” Hannibal smiles. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Will. I hope you won’t mind my saying that I do hope we meet again, though perhaps without the near dire circumstances.”

Will laughs. Shoves one hand through his hair. Wonders if Hannibal might be open to men. If Jimmy had seen Hannibal's place, he’d say, “Will, this is the hallmark of a big ol’ gay!” But Hannibal had said it's inherited. His parents' collection, with a few of his own additions.

“I’d like that,” he says. “Thanks, again.”

“You’re very welcome, Will.”

Will slides from the cab of the truck, balancing his tray of coffees. The soft slam of the truck door seems final. He smiles at Hannibal through the window and turns to the motel.

As the engine’s growl fades in the distance, Will stands outside his motel door. It’s 8:30 am, and though the sun is high and shining, he can’t help but feel a little lost in the dark. And hopeful he’ll see Hannibal Lecter again.

Jack opens the door. “There you are! Is that coffee?”

“The best in the area, I’m told.”

Jack grabs one and peels back the lid's opening. He takes a sip, his eyes wandering to the distance. Distress drips from the man in waves.

“Did something happen?” Will asks the question in as soothing a tone as he can muster.

Jack closes a hand over the top of his coffee, averting his eyes from Will. “Nah. Stop doing that, man. Not today.”

Must be something to do with Bella. “Sorry. It’s hard to turn off sometimes.” He drags one heel through the gravel. “Are we set to visit with Mr. and Mrs. Cooney?” Rayland and Temperance Cooney were the parents of the first vic, James Cooney.

“Yes. Let’s go. You’ve got your stuff?”

Will silently thanks Hannibal for cleaning his clothes. “Yeah. Just let me drop off these coffees with Bev and Jimmy.”

“What did you do this morning? I got up and you’d already made your bed,” Jack says. “You don’t look like you went running.”

“You didn’t get my message from the front desk?”

“Man, you know if you left a message at this front desk, the likelihood of it reaching me is nil. Why not just leave a note?”

It then occurs to Will that Jack never knew Will was gone the entire night. Jack probably took something that knocked him out, and then spent his morning worrying about Bella. Will’s absence barely registered.

It wasn’t looking good for his partner’s focus on this case. Something must’ve gone wrong with her treatment.

Will just shook his head. “Yeah. You’re right. I should’ve left a note.”

He actually felt a little relieved about not sharing with Jack that he’d spent the night with a gorgeous Kentucky mountain man.

Chapter 5

“Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Cooney,” says Jack. They’re in the corner office of a historic building overlooking downtown Barbourville. Rayland Cooney’s decor is part cowhide and brown leather, part industrial steel and exposed brick. The floating shelves support books like *How Kentucky Became Southern*, a hefty biography on Abraham Lincoln, and somewhat surprisingly, a book of poetry by Wendell Berry.

Jack asks, “Will your wife be joining us?”

“Tempe’s having a hard time.” Rayland Cooney is a big guy with a slim waist and sharp cut clothing. His features are angular, handsome, with steel-grey eyes and one of those big all-white-but-still-sleazy smiles. “Barry was like an uncle to James. I’m sure between the two of us, we can answer any questions you may have.” He gives a little wave to the man beside him.

Barry Zollinger keeps his ample weight tucked neatly in a tailored suit. His pale forehead shines beneath the fluorescent lighting. “James was a good boy. What happened to him was god-awful.” He makes the sign of the cross in the air.

Will represses a shudder. The man is unctuous. Usually this kind of pantomime makes him laugh, but something about this man is uniquely dishonest.

“We’re here on the account of there being a third death,” Jack says.

“Yeah, Harry’s brother Billy. Bit of a turd, but I didn’t mind the man.” Rayland leans back in his chair with his arms crossed, his knees spread. He seems off-kilter. Nervous. Defensive. Will senses this isn’t a subject he wants to visit. It hits too close to a grief he’s trying to hide.

“Then you know Harry and Bill Ashcroft?”

“We’re working with Harry on a deal. He’s got some coal on his land. We aim to buy it,” Rayland says. “You know, folks, coal is the best resource due to its abundance and reliability. It’s affordability, too—”

“Did James also know Bill Ashcroft?” Jack butts in.

Rayland lets his arms fall into his lap. “My son was the first to make contact with Harry and…I think he met Bill Ashcroft. Uh, I don’t recall where they met, but James chatted up Harry, as the landowner. Brought him in. We discussed terms, and after that, James wasn’t involved much. He doesn’t do contract work, he’s more of a first steps kind of guy. Was.” Rayland’s gaze floats to his lap.

“Did James know Madeleine Goddard?” Jack takes out her photo and shows it to them. She was a handsome woman, with fair skin, bright blue eyes, and scarlet curls.

Rayland leans forward to peer at the photo. Purses his lips and shakes his head. “The police showed me her photo back when she…was killed. Still don't recognize her.” He sounds disappointed.

“Pretty lady. Too bad about her.” Barry actually seems sincere, his face hooded with sadness.

Rayland’s arms tighten around his middle. “And Bill, he was killed the same way as that woman and my boy were?”

“Yes,” Jack says.

“So it’s a serial killer?” Barry asks. His energy is spiking with nerves, shoulders shifting and feet sliding beneath his chair.

“We may be dealing with a serial killer, yes,” Will says. Normally he puts a damper on that kind of inquiry, but there’s something about Barry that makes him want to poke about a little. Small pokes with a very sharp stick.

“But more importantly, will you find the sonuvabitch?” Rayland’s tone turns cold and angry. His eyes harden into two storm-weathered pebbles.

“That’s our job, Mr. Cooney,” Jack says. “We do what we can with the information we have.”

Rayland works his jaw as he shakes his head. “James was a fine boy. He didn’t get in trouble with the law. He had a good future here.”

“Can you tell us where your son was the night he went missing?”

“My son doesn’t live at home. His friends said they didn’t have plans with him. Sometimes they’d just meet up somewhere, but not that night. I don’t know if he was on a date or what. He wasn’t the type to stay at home on a Friday night.”

“Did he have a girlfriend?” Jack asks.

Ray gives a little snort. Barry answers for them, expression drawn into an ‘aw-shucks’ kind of grin. “James was very popular with the girls. A real lady’s man. Couldn’t keep ’em off ‘im. He wasn’t ready to settle down with just one.”

“Do you have the names of any of these women?”

“You’d have to ask his friends. It’s not like we could keep track of them, right, Ray?” Barry laughs. The gleam of perspiration on his face grates at Will.

Ray’s not much better, but he’s wrapped up in his grief. Not wild and lashing about like Harry Ashcroft, who seethes over his brother's death as if it were something done to him and now he has to box at every shadow that comes along. Ray’s anger is directed inward. Possibly explosive. Wonder if Temperance Cooney has ever had to call the sheriff.

“The names of his friends are in the police report,” Ray says. “What else do you need from us?”

“If it’s a serial killer, shouldn’t you guys be making some kind of announcement? Ya know, looking out for the public?” Barry asks.

“And cause mass hysteria? That’s more dangerous, Mr. Zollinger,” Will says. “And possibly sends our killer into hiding. What we’re looking for now is a way to link the three victims. A pattern. Why he selects who he selects, what his possible motive is, and any mistakes he’s made. This is why we need to know more about the victims, and we do that by talking with friends and family members.”

“You think it’s one guy?”

“We can’t be sure.” Will is, though. Sure. From his examination of the body and the crime scenes, each one was one person’s anger, one person’s retribution. James Cooney, Madeleine Goddard, and Bill Ashcroft were found offensive and wanting, and were chosen for a punitive display. A warning, not unlike tar-dipped heads on pikes along the London Bridge in the late Middle Ages. “Is there anyone that takes exception to your kind of operation? Any protestors, violent dissenters, naysayers who have threatened harm against you or the property?”

“Our business has its detractors, but they don’t understand the economy if you ask me. Coal is—”

“We’re not here for your pitch, Mr. Zollinger. We want to know if there are some people we should look at.”

“KAASM is the most vocal thorn in our side. The Kentucky Alliance Against Strip Mining. But James was never their target. And we get anonymous death threats. We keep a file.” Rayland picks up his phone and types with his thumbs. “I’ll have the secretary hand those over.”

“But...Bill and that woman didn’t work here.” Barry’s mouth is downturned, and his brow furrows with concern.

“But you were working on a land deal with the Ashcrofts?” Jack asks.

“With Harry Ashcroft,” Barry says. “Bill didn’t have the ownership.”

“We’ll look at every avenue. Did anyone else know of your potential deal with Harry Ashcroft?”

“Sure, some of our employees.” Rayland blew a breath out.

“Those hippies over at KAASM are annoying, but I didn’t think they were psychopaths,” Barry says, in a wondering voice, seemingly to himself.

“You’d be surprised where you can find psychopaths,” Will says. His tongue curls around the words with pleasure as he watches fear deepen on the man’s face.

Jack’s annoyed gaze slides over to him, and then back to the execs. “Was there anyone against this deal in particular? Anyone who would have been negatively impacted?”

“Since the deal hasn’t been made public knowledge, I’d say no,” Ray says.

“Did James approach any other landowners in the area?” Will asks.

“Well, yes. He did,” Ray says. His arms slide into his lap, clasping his hands.

“They said no?” Jack asks.

“From Fire Creek? They all said no.”

“Did any of them border the Ashcroft land?”

“Well, yeah,” Barry says. “The Ashcrofts have four hundred acres, but the guy who surrounds most of their land gave us a flat no and seemed peeved about being asked.”

“What’s his name?” Jack asks and holds up his notebook.

“Hannibal Lester? No, Lecter, I think it was,” Barry says, rubbing his chins. “Strange name. Old family, we were told by Harry. Lots of untouched land. It’s a shame. Would have been a prize deal for everyone involved.”

Will feels his insides congeal like slow moving molasses. His breath catches in his throat, and his chest goes as still as a stone. If it weren’t for the conversation moving past his little caught moment in time, he might have ossified right there in the chair. Would this put Hannibal on the suspect list?

“Thanks, we’ll look into KAASM, and this Hannibal Lecter. Plus everything your secretary can give us.”

“Hope you won’t be wasting your time,” Ray says. It’s quiet. Sour. The grief-laced words of a depressed man.

“You never know what may give us our best lead,” Jack says and stands.

Will stands and abruptly holds out his card to Rayland, and then Barry. “Thank you for your time,” he says. Jack does a double take. As the lead, he’s always been the one to hand out his cards, so no doubt he’s wondering at Will’s uncharacteristic actions. But Will needs to get out.

And how does he tell Jack he spent the night with Hannibal Lecter?

Well, not like that. How does he explain that he spent the night at the man’s cabin after he got lost in the woods? Or why he never mentioned getting lost in the woods, or spending the night in a stranger’s cabin in the woods?

As they step outside the office into the May sunshine, Jack cuts into his thoughts. “Well, I suppose we give this file to Deputy Zeller to check out.” He holds out a manila folder stuffed with printed paper of threats sent to the company for the past six months.

“That’s a lot of angry people,” Will says.

“Hmph. Suppose we should visit this Hannibal Lecter. We’ll get an address from the deputy.”

Will rubs his fingers through his curls, and then scrubs one hand over his mouth and beard. “Yeah. Hey, do you think Bill knew about the deal, and disagreed with Harry on it? He might not’ve been the one to inherit, but I’m sure he felt he had just as much a say as Harry did anyway.”

“Well, someone who might know all the feelings from Bill on it might be willing to tell us.”

“Melinda Ashcroft?”

“Bingo.”

Jack nods. “Let’s ask her.”

Amanda opens the door and lets them in. “I’ll let Ms. Ashcroft know you’re back.”

Jack watches out the front window. Will can already tell who he’s looking for.

“Harry coming?” he asks.

“No movement across the way, yet.”

Heels clicking on wood announces Melinda Ashcroft’s arrival. “Gentlemen. Can I help you?” She’s dressed in the black of mourning, with a peacock brooch at her throat, her hair pulled back and her eye makeup dark and thick.

“Apologies for the sudden intrusion. We won’t take up too much of your time. We have a question for you about your husband.”

“Ask away.” She folds her arms.

Will swallows. He’d thought she would invite them in for more sweet tea, but it seems Ms. Ashcroft isn’t feeling too friendly today. They’re going to have this conversation while standing in the foyer.

“I understand that Harry has made a deal with Cooney Energy Company to remove coal from some of the property?”

“He is negotiating one, yes,” she says. “Our current situation has delayed talk, I imagine. We’re still waiting on the release of his body.” She fixes them with a hard look.

“Was your husband present at these talks?”

“He was. They were mapping out the edges, last I heard. What does this have to do with anything?”

So Bill wasn’t against the strip mining.

“The first victim, James Cooney, was Rayland Cooney’s son. He’s the co-owner of Cooney Energy Company.”

She releases a breath, and stares upward.

“Did you know James Cooney?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“We’re still looking for a link between the three victims. This links two of them. Now, it may be a coincidence, but we need to follow all avenues,” Jack says.

“Of course.” Melinda shakes her head. “Bill had his eye on the bottom line, much like Harry. Blow up some small peaks, and get paid for doing nothing about it but owning the land.”

“You sound like you disapprove,” Will says. He can practically smell it on her.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “What we have here is beautiful, and largely unspoiled.” Her eyes shift to the window. “It’s a sin against God, if you ask me, to defile his gifts in such a way. And…” She rubs at her elbows, and then pulls her arms against herself in a tighter hug. “Well, I grew up on tales of what’s in these woods. They seem silly now, but sometimes when I look into the shadows of the trees...I feel like something far older than us has been haunting these hills for millenia.”

A shiver dances its way up Will’s spine. He doesn’t miss Jack’s roll of his eyes. Goddamint, he’d like to ask her about these tales, but they don’t have time.

“Are you friendly with your neighbor, Hannibal Lecter?” Jack asks.

Melinda tilts her head, her lips twisting with the hint of a smile. “Hanni Lecter? He’s an odd duck. He’s an artist though, so he gets away with it.” A muscle in Will’s jaw jumps as he thinks of their brief discussion on art. Will with no time to appreciate it, while Hannibal was living in what could easily pass for an art museum with furniture. “And he’s got money. I heard he’s planning on revitalizing the downtown area. Giving the buildings a face lift.” She nods as if she approves. “They do need it.”

“Do you think he’d be upset if Harry and Bill were planning on having their property strip mined next to his?”

“I don’t know him well enough to say. He’s always been very polite to us, but he mostly keeps to himself.”

Will can believe it. Hannibal was warm, controlled, and urbane, as if the gun he’d pointed at Will earlier was a gallant handshake and now they could get on with the evening on a nightcap.

An image of Hannibal chopping wood in the morning sunlight crosses his mind. He pushes it away.

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Ashcroft,” Jack says. The questioning is over. Will nods to her, and out the door they go.

“Well, it’s nice to see you again, handsome.” Jolene strides over to their table. They’re back at Betty’s. Jack’s in the bathroom, which is good, because Will needs time to figure out how to word his confession, and he doesn’t need Jolene to let the cat out of the bag first.

“Morning, ma’am,” he says.

“Don’t you ma’am me, it’s Jolene. Don’t you even start with Ms. Jackson. It’s bad enough Hannibal simply refuses.”

Will grins. “You got it, ma—Jolene.”

She twinkles at him and takes out her notepad. “Can I get you coffee?”

Will arches an eyebrow.

Jolene leans over and whispers, “I know, mine’s better, you don’t have to tell me. But my sister won’t let me take over the coffee service here.” Jolene’s eyes roll. “She thinks she’s superior in everything. You got siblings?”

“None. By the way, how do you run a bed and breakfast and work here too?”

“I help out on lunch service is all. Then I’m back to mind any guests, though I got a girl who works for me during the day, flipping beds and such. We make it work. How’s your investigation going?”

“It’s going.” Will rubs his beard, wondering if he can keep her distracted from talk of Hannibal and their early morning visit once Jack gets out of the john. “You said Bill Ashcroft was a bully. What do you think about Melinda Ashcroft?”

Jolene tsks and settles one hand on her hip. “Poor girl. We grew up together, you know. Melinda was one of the McKees, and Bill Ashcroft set his greedy eye on her and swept her into that big ol’ house and she’s never been the same. The only time we see her is for church. They’re regulars on Sundays. Melinda does some charity work through the church, too, bless her heart.”

A snort rumbles from the counter. A whip-thin older man with a scruffy beard and grey hair sends them a baleful glare. “She sure got notions, don’t she? Didn’t even visit her ma before she died.”

“Now you got no cause for saying that. She visited. I know she did. But she had to sneak behind Billy’s back.” Jolene turns back to Will with those big eyes. “Can you imagine? Just to see your own dying mother!”

“Did Bill often try to control Melinda’s movements?”

“Not just Bill. Harry’s got ideas about how women should behave too, though heavens knows why. He never got married. Most eligible bachelor in town.”

The old man laughs. “I have a better chance of getting a date than that prick does!”

Jolene laughs with him. Will gets the feeling he’s missing something, but these people have lived in this town all their lives. They have a long, thick history together.

But there is one other bachelor of which he knows. “And what about Hannibal?”

The man stops laughing. “Lecter?”

Jolene narrows her eyes at him, but that doesn’t stop the stranger from speaking. “That mad dog’s a menace. He’s not right in the head.”

“Oh, stop it now, you old fool. Hannibal’s an artist. He’s just one of those eccentric types.”

Second time Will heard that today.

“He’s not right.” Another man sitting on the other side of the first old guy, bigger and brawnier, speaks up. “And he’s dangerous.”

Will’s ears prick up. “What do you mean he’s dangerous?”

“Both of you shut your traps,” Jolene says. “Hannibal Lecter is one of the kindest men I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and that’s more than I can say for the two of you. He’s done more for this town than anyone knows.”

She turns back to Will, just as one of the men says, “But he don’t go to church, do he?”

Jolene sets her chin. “No, he doesn’t attend church, but the priest does visit him for dinner now and again, don’t he? Would the reverend waste his time on dinner with the man if he weren’t Christian?”

Grumbles and shifting shoulders ripple down the counter line.

“This reverend got a name?” Jack appears at the table. Will never heard him coming. How much did he hear?

“Jerry Popplewell. He’s the best reverend we’ve had in years, you might say.” She poises her pen over her notepad. “Coffee, agents? Anything else I can get you?”

Jack looks at Will. “Pie. Whatever’s the best you got.”

“Same,” says Will.

“Before we return to the motel, I want to see this reverend. He might know something about this Hannibal Lecter, and be able to tell us more about the Ashcrofts.”

Will’s stomach burns like it’s on fire. “Seems like a lot of footwork, doesn’t it?”

“It’s the job, Will.”

To be honest, Will is curious to see what Reverend Popplewell will say about Hannibal. Well, not just curious. He’s thirsting like he’s run a goddamn 10k and the cups are all empty at the finish line. “What makes you think the reverend knows more than the town gossip?”

Jack glances at him. “You mean Ms. Jackson back there?”

“Long time resident, works the only local diner.” Honestly, Will’s a little afraid of what Popplewell might say about Hannibal. Too much glowing praise of the man is proving to further distract Will from the investigation, hormones swaddling him like a teen boy with his first infatuation.

But the guys in the diner did say Hannibal was dangerous. What had that been about?

And why did the thought excite him?

Is Hannibal Lecter dangerous, or is he the town’s benefactor?

A little dark shadow inside Will lifts its head to remark, ‘Why not both?’

Will shakes his head. At least he’s no longer feeling pulled to the mountains and the woods. Guess one evening lost in them was enough.

Jack pulls up to the parish house of the only church in town. It’s white like the church, with a dark, shingled roof. The garden beds are tidy plots of boxwoods, irises, and forget-me-nots.

A man opens the door before they can knock. “Hello, strangers. I’m Reverend Jerry Popplewell. How can I be of service?” He speaks in a sing-song voice that matches a TV commercial smile. His hair is severely parted in the middle, slicked and shiny. The guy looks like he belongs in a Vegas chapel rather than out here in the sticks.

“Reverend, I’m Special Agent Jack Crawford with the FBI, this is my partner, Will Graham.” He flashes his badge and tucks it away. “We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Is this about Bill Ashcroft?”

“And the other two victims. May we come in?”

“Please,” he says, and steps back, holding the door wide open.

Rev. Popplewell leads them into a small office with two wooden chairs pointed at a gargantuan desk. He slides into the leather-padded office chair behind the desk. If Will had sat there, no doubt he’d feel swallowed by the desk and chair combination, but Jerry Popplewell is long-limbed and barrel-chested, king of his little castle with an office set-up to match.

The hard wood chairs are beautifully crafted, but without padding or pillows. Will can’t help but think there’s a metaphor in all this.

The reverend leans forward onto his elbows. “Bill’s loss and the manner of his death has shaken the very pillars of this community. I am so glad you came to speak with me today. I want to help. What can I tell you?”

“Tell us what you know about the Ashcrofts,” Jack says.

“Well, they’re good people. They come to church on Sundays, tithe regularly, give to charity. Harry Ashcroft can be a bit of a hothead as I understand it, but he’s nothing but a gentleman when I see him.”

“And Bill?”

“Bill. Bill was...well, he was a lot like Harry. But I think he was tormented. Conflicted.”

Jack’s eyes narrow. “Conflicted?”

“Well, it can’t be easy living in the shadow of a brother like Harry. Bit of Cain and Abel at play.” His eyes widen. “Not to say one would murder the other. Despite their differences, those two were close.”

“We’ve been told that Bill Ashcroft was a bully,” Will says.

“To men he considered his inferiors, perhaps.” Reverend Popplewell bobs his chin once. “Bill was troubled. I tried to reach out to him, as I would any lost lamb in the flock. He was...reluctant to admit to the challenges God laid out before him.”

“Challenges?” Jack tilts his ear toward the reverend.

“Humility, for one. Faith, for another.” Reverend Popplewell rubs his chin. “Mind you, I wouldn’t tell you so much if it weren’t the fact that the man’s dead, and the circumstances surrounding his death are appalling and heinous.” Then he pauses. Seems to think this over before saying, “Though I’m not sure how a man’s spiritual ills would factor into this particular situation.”

“If Bill pissed the wrong person off because of his ‘spiritual ills,’ it might be relevant.” Will can’t help the bite in his tone.

The reverend’s eyes sharpen, pinning Will with their gaze. “Bill struggled to break bread with his fellow man. Or, who he saw as the common man. And I may be a man of faith, but I am

educated too, Agent Graham. Bill didn't suffer just from spiritual ills. A good head doctor would have probably done him wonders, but that's not a common practice in this town. I think Harry did what he could for Bill, and Melinda, bless that woman's heart, soothed his beast when it needed soothing. But Bill was always headed for trouble, I fear. I never expected it would manifest like this." Popplewell lowers his voice. "Word's gotten around about how he was found."

"What about their neighbor, Hannibal Lecter?" Jack asks. A shiver runs down Will's spine at the mention of his name.

"Hanni Lecter?" The reverend smiles. "He's an interesting fellow. Knows his bible in and out. Never had such entertaining conversation with a man as I do with Hannibal Lecter."

"You have dinner with him?" Will asks.

"I do." Popplewell beams. "About every fortnight. Wouldn't miss it."

Something contracts in Will's chest, dark and cold. "And you...minister to him then, since he doesn't attend church?"

The reverend laughs. "Sometimes I'm not sure if I'm ministering to him or if he's ministering to me. I grew up in this town. Went away to seminary and came back. I knew the Lecter family. And I swore to myself that I would get a Lecter to step into this church. My predecessor, Reverend Joseph Brueckner, was intent on getting at least one of them to come to church at least once. Not sure why the fixation, but once I took over, I got caught up in the same notion. Got myself a dinner invite. And wouldn't you know, all these years later, I'm still going up there to dinner, but I couldn't care less if he ever stepped foot in these doors." He picks up a rubber stress ball from the desk, and squeezes it. "He's got an incisive mind. Smartest man I know. It's a pleasure to eat at his dinner table." He leans forward as if he's about to make a serious confession. "Don't let any of the old ladies hear me say it, but he's the best cook in town."

Will can picture the two of them together, heads bent over a delicious meal. Jerry expounding on Hannibal's finer qualities. Hannibal, being pleased, offering a reverend the kind of comfort he can't get in town.

Jealousy burns in his gut.

Jack's oblivious. "So, you know him pretty well?"

"Yeah, I would say more than most anyone living here. Hanni likes to keep to himself up on that hill of his."

Will clenches his teeth.

"I understand he owns quite a bit of land."

"Some eight hundred acres, I believe." Jerry steeples his fingers.

“Would you say he’s protective of it? Would he allow any building on it, or perhaps, strip mining?”

“Oh, Hanni wouldn’t go in on that. I don’t think he needs the money. And he loves this land.” Pride sings in Jerry’s voice. Will’d like to punch him.

Jack’s still going. “Did you know Cooney Energy Company approached him about mining the land?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. I’m sure Hanni said no.”

“He did.”

“Good.” Jerry waves one hand. “Don’t need that kind of taint coming into this town.”

Jack’s eyebrows raise. “What do you know about it?”

“Look at where we are. Strip mining happens in these hills, and the poison will come running right down into our valley. The water will turn red, but it won’t be a holy message. It won’t be safe for the children to drink.” Popplewell shakes his head. “Plus, I know some people are trying to get a little tourist business going here. Strip mining won’t help with that. Might provide a small amount of jobs in the short run, but in the long run it won’t do us any good. If the land is spoiled, why would any other businesses want to move in?”

“We’ve heard from some locals that Hannibal Lecter is dangerous. Can you speak to that claim?” Jack asks.

Will can’t stop the thrill from dancing down his spine. He shrugs his shoulders, rolls his neck to soothe the sensation.

“Heh. Bet whoever said that is a friend of the men Hanni taught a lesson.” Popplewell leans back in his chair and drops his hands into his lap. “I don’t condone violence, of course, but I don’t think you can fault him on what happened. The sheriff didn’t even arrest him, and as far as I know, there’s no official record. The men didn’t press charges.”

“Multiple men?”

“You know, when Hanni was just a boy, he was picked on by the others. Then he got bigger than most everybody. And I don’t mean just by his size. He’s got presence, if you know what I mean.”

Will does. Hannibal is only a couple inches taller, yet something about him holds attention, makes people stand up taller, makes them move. Hannibal takes up room without even trying.

“It happened downtown one night after one of the music festivals. Hanni always comes to enjoy the music, and sometimes we have the pleasure of seeing him perform.” Will remembers the hammered dulcimer standing in the corner of the living room. “This may be a dry county, but there’s no shortage on moonshine. Some of the men imbibed, and a couple of them got it into their heads to try Hannibal Lecter on for size. Thought they’d have advantage. Hanni put them in their place. Broke one man’s arm, sent the other packing with a

bloodied nose and plenty of bruises. The man with the arm went to the hospital, but the sheriff got their stories and the stories of the witnesses. Said Hanni moved so quick it was like the strike of a rattlesnake; he took both men down in seconds. But he wasn't the one to throw the first punch. Nor the second. Hanni hadn't been drinking much, and he didn't start it. And he didn't want to press charges against the men who did."

"Who were these men?"

"Darrell Gulley and Bo Fitzwater." Reverend Popplewell scans both of them with serious eyes. "You don't think Hanni's responsible for Bill's murder, do ya?" He scoffs with a laugh. "Hannibal ain't anyone's enemy. He might be the gentlest man I know."

Is Hannibal a gentle lover? Will refuses to think of this snake-oil reverend in Hannibal's bed, instead turning his thoughts to the sensation of Hannibal's hand next to his. Warm, sure, kind. Hannibal took the sofa so Will could sleep in the bed. He offered breakfast and polite, soothing conversation. Nothing seemed dangerous about him after he lowered the rifle and realized Will needed help. But the idea of Hannibal taking down two mean drunks with ease made Will's blood quicken something hot.

Will swallows, but finds no comfort, no moisture in his mouth. He still hasn't told Jack he's met the man.

When they bid the reverend goodbye, Popplewell wishes them well and 'God Bless.' They get into the car.

"Let's get dinner and get some sleep," Jack says. "Tomorrow, we go see this Hannibal Lecter guy."

"Sure." Will bites his lip and looks out the window, his stomach a miasma of conflict. Now's the time to tell him. Now's the time to admit to Jack that, of all the dumb shit, he got lost in the woods at night and Hannibal Lecter saved his life. That everything that charlatan Jerry Popplewell said about Hannibal was the truth.

But the words remain lodged in his chest. His mouth opens. Closes. And the words circle like vultures scenting carrion.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's eyes split open as icy water eddies around his ankles, the cold nipping like fish with sharp teeth. The shocking frigidity makes him hiss through his teeth.

Where the fuck am I?

And how'd he get here? It's early, the sky a soft mix of violet-grey and a hint of rising sun. His breath fogs in the morning gloaming. He's barefoot, clothed only in the boxers and tee he wore to bed.

At his periphery, something in the water lurches. He freezes. Overcoming his lifelong phobia of natural water bodies is a process. Even joined Jack on several fishing trips, standing on the banks, their low conversation like a gentle breeze along the stream.

Now he stands ankle-deep and some dark shadow is sliding through the murk. The sight quickens his breath. A mere two yards away, it emerges—antlers first, festooned with stringy riverweed.

It's a stag. The same stag? Its eyes aren't not the oblong brown eyes of an ungulate, but the round-pupiled eyes of a primate. Human eyes.

Stepping back makes him aware of the cold again, his toes numb and his arms wrapped around himself.

His eyes remain riveted to the thing's changing face; its body seems to lengthen, to grow taller and more human-like with arms and legs, a thin waist and wide hips still submerged within the water. The muzzle and ears shrink and fangs protrude from its lips.

It lets out a loud snort. Will turns his face away and downward, almost submissive. Should he look it in the eye?

Then he notices—the water around them is running red.

Will wakes. Sweat, like the slime of a snail, trails down his back. The room is dark, but he peers into the corners of the room where the shadows are at their heaviest. Nothing moves.

Somewhere in the motel, a door shuts with a muffled thud.

Will licks his lips and swallows. Peels off his shirt and throws it on the floor. He makes himself get out of bed and retrieve a fresh tee from his suitcase.

As he slides back under the sheet, avoiding the wet outline of where he lay before, he thinks of Hannibal's bed. Comfortable, warm, with just a hint of the man's scent in the room. It's

not often he comes across someone he finds attractive, let alone still thinks about the next day.

His stomach rolls as he thinks about having to see Hannibal this morning. How is he going to explain to Jack that he's already met the man?

He'll have to tell him when he wakes.

And he waits for dawn.

As they drive up to Hannibal's cabin, Will's stomach slips and slides like a jostled garbage truck. Unease turns his hands as clammy as a dead fish. His urge to upchuck his breakfast increases by the minute.

Jack would normally pick up on Will's dampened demeanor, but he's caught up in his own personal drama. Jack spoke again with his wife the night before. He's a different man with her, all soft, teasing speech and low hums. Will hasn't dared to ask about her treatment, afraid it might pop the man's protective bubble. He can read it anyway in the line of Jack's shoulders and the downturned corners of his mouth. Bella's not improving. Jack doesn't want to talk about it. Focusing on the case distances him from a lingering grief.

When the cabin comes into focus, Will's breath seizes. He'd forgotten just how beautiful the place is, a two-story A-frame with an addition where Hannibal's kitchen and other rooms must lie. Will can remember the cavernous ceiling where the living space and dining room are each overshadowed by antlered chandeliers, the stone fireplace shared between them.

What he didn't notice are the figures. Some as tall as he, perhaps taller, lurking among the shrubbery. They're copper in color, humanoid, some with strange elfin faces and others as beautiful and as fine as Grecian statues. A woman's eyes are closed and flowers spill from her mouth. Fish circle a creature's head in a dreamy splash of water. The one closest to the porch wears antlers, and the face, somewhat feminine, looks grave and forbidding.

"Jesus." Jack parks and shuts the engine off.

Will steps out of the car in a wooden, almost mechanical movement. Shuts the door. Jack slams his side.

"Nice cabin," Jack says.

Sweat gathers on the back of his neck, and it isn't the weather. Will knows he only has a moment to admit what he's omitted, but then the moment slips away as Hannibal Lecter opens the front door.

"Hello, gentlemen," he says. Will's stomach flips at the sound of the man's voice, all soft, Southern croon laced with something foreign. "May I be of service?"

Will steps alongside Jack as they reach the bottom steps of the porch. “I’m Agent Jack Crawford. FBI. This is my partner, Will Graham. We just need to ask you a few questions.”

Will flashes him his badge, looks him in the eye, pleading him to understand. *Play along. Don’t say anything.*

Hannibal watches him with hard brown eyes. Glances back at Jack. “A pleasure to meet you both. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have to the best of my ability.”

Will holds back a sigh of relief. He’ll explain things to Hannibal later.

If there is a later.

“Mr. Lecter, we understand you were approached by Cooney Energy Company to allow them proprietary access to the coal on your land.”

“I did receive several letters, yes. And one visit from one of their employees.”

“What did you tell them?”

Hannibal lifts an eyebrow. “As I’m sure you already know, I replied to their first letter with a written letter declining. The visit came soon after that.”

“And what was the name of the employee who visited you?”

“I believe it was the same man who ended up murdered. A James Cooney.”

Will can feel Jack’s excitement practically jump from him.

“Then you are aware that Bill Ashcroft was murdered in the same manner as James Cooney?”

“That is the town gossip these days.” Hannibal folds his hands behind his back.

“Are you surprised to learn they also approached Harry Ashcroft, and Harry Ashcroft is negotiating a deal?”

“I’m not surprised. The Ashcrofts are not tied to their land such as I am to mine. Their family isn’t rooted here.” Will detects a note of pride in Hannibal’s voice.

“What is your relationship like with the Ashcrofts?”

“Well,” Hannibal’s eyes shift from Jack to Will and back, “we’re neighbors. When I heard about what had happened to Bill, I dropped off a casserole for Melinda, with a card expressing my sorrow for her loss. I sent a similar card to Harry. I do plan on attending the service when it happens. Bill and I weren’t close friends, but we were neighborly.”

“Not close?”

“I am a private man.” Hannibal’s eyes float past them, as if surveying his front yard. “You might say I subscribe to the idea that good fences make good neighbors.”

“Right. Do you recognize this woman?” Jack steps up the porch and shows Hannibal the photo of Madeleine Goddard.

“She’s the other victim,” Hannibal says. “I saw her photo in the paper.”

“Did you know Madeleine Goddard?”

“No. I rarely travel outside of Fire Creek. Unless perhaps she attended a music event here? I might’ve seen her in the crowd, but I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Will digs his hands into his pockets. His reading on Hannibal is similar to the one from that morning over breakfast. Calm. Curious. Inviting.

Will wants to be invited. Holding himself still is almost painful.

Jack isn’t finished. “How do you feel about your neighbor’s part of the mountain being strip mined?”

Hannibal’s lips flatten into a neat horizon. “I’m unimpressed with the company’s methods of extracting coal. It could cause many problems for the town. I’m disappointed that Harry would consider it, but what recourse do I have?” He shows his hands, palms out. “I will do what I can for the town should ill effects of the strip mining occur.”

A caretaker, Will realizes. Hannibal sees himself as a caretaker. With all his money living on the hillside, he could look down on the town with condescension, but he feels more...paternal. Jolene had said, “Hannibal Lecter has done more good for this town than anyone here knows.”

What else has he done?

“Do you know anyone who would have had it out for Bill Ashcroft?” Jack asks.

Hannibal glances in the direction of town and back in a slow, easy glide of his eyes. “I don’t know that anyone in town would murder them in such a manner.”

“Hm. People can surprise you.” Jack slides his hand into his jacket and takes out his card. “Thank you for your time. If you think of anything, or hear anything, please give us a call.”

Hannibal takes the card, but his eyes cut to Will’s as he does. “It’s getting warm. Would you and your partner care for sweet tea before you go?”

Yes. No. Oh, Jesus.

“Thank you, but we’ve gotta be on our way.” Jack steps off the porch. His eyes look over the clay figures watching them from the bushes. “What’s all the statuary about?”

“I created them,” Hannibal says with a slight smile. “I refer to these ones as my guardians.”

“Interesting.” Jack almost bumps into Will as he swings around to look. Will jumps, but recovers. He gives a shaky nod to Hannibal.

“Thank you,” he says. The return duck of Hannibal’s chin is small. His eyes look sanguine in the light, like the copper clay of his ‘guardians.’

Will turns and follows Jack to the car. Once they’re seated and their doors are shut, Jack says, “You were quiet.”

Will’s shoulders draw up around his ears. He rubs one hand over his mouth. “Felt like I was being watched.”

“They are creepy.” Jack turns the key and the engine growls. His eyes stay riveted to Hannibal, who watches them from the porch with the same enigmatic smile Will has come to like. “Kinda like him. What did you get off of him?”

Will licks his lips and stares down at his lap. “Everyone needs a hobby, I guess.”

Jack huffs a laugh. He turns the car around, and follows the dirt road. Will watches in the side mirror as a smirking Hannibal fades from view.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to those who have commented or kudosed. It makes me so happy to see it!

Chapter 7

“Tox report for Bill Ashcroft is normal. He died of blood loss. Likely he passed out before that happened. It would have been excruciating. His tongue was cut from his throat with a scalpel. He was flayed and eviscerated with precision. Someone knew what they were doing. All the details are in the report.” Beverly hands the file to Jack. “I leave it in your capable hands. We’re needed back in Lexington.”

Jack exhales noisily. He opens his mouth to respond, but his phone rings, morphing his expression from tired-exasperated to tired-worried. “I’ve gotta take this.” He steps outside into the hall.

Will looks at their shrinking task force huddled inside the tiny conference room. Bev and Jimmy are heading back. Deputy Brian Zeller is sitting at one end of the table looking ill at Beverly’s casual recount of Bill Ashcroft’s injuries. Sheriff Mosley glowers from the corner with a coffee mug in hand, though he hasn’t taken a sip in about five minutes. Will can sense a storm stirring inside him and before Mosley can say something, Will speaks.

“We have a connection between James Cooney and Bill Ashcroft. We need to find the connection to Madeleine Goddard. If we can connect Madeleine Goddard, we’ll be on the right path.”

“Her sister ain’t back from her vacation yet. House-sitter says she’s due back in two days,” Zeller says.

“Right. In the meantime, I’d like to interview her coworkers again.”

Sheriff Mosley shifts in the corner, but he doesn’t say anything.

Jack opens the door, his cell phone clutched to his chest. His face is blank, but Will feels like a weighted blanket has settled around him, smothering him in numb disbelief. Beneath it, embers burn.

Will stands from his chair and herds Jack back out into the hallway, shutting the door behind them. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing. We gotta get to work—”

“Don’t lie to me, Jack. I *know.”*

“Then you already know, dontcha?” Jack may be a big man but he moves like lightning. Will’s pushed against the wall before he can blink, his head thudding against the hard surface. “You already know,” Jack growls in his face.

“It isn’t working,” Will says. Jack’s forearm is in his throat, but he swallows against it and speaks anyway. “The new treatment isn’t working.”

Jack deflates like a puppet with cut strings. Releases Will, and stumbles against the opposite wall, staring down at his shoes.

“Is she…”

Jack’s eyes snap to his. “She’s not okay, Will. I’m her only family and I’m *here.* ” He spits out the last word with anger.

“Then go to her,” Will says.

Jack releases a harsh exhale as he flings his hands about. “I have a job to do, Will.”

“Let me do it. I’ve got to make the connection with Madeleine Goddard, right? Why do you need to stay here? I can do that. You go home to Bella, and if I come up with anything, I’ll let you know. You can be back here in four hours. It’s not that long a car ride, Jack.”

Jack rubs his temples with his fingers.

Will presses his case. “Listen, you can help by doing some things remotely, right? If I need cell phone records or something else? And you can do it from Bella’s side.”

Jack throws his hands down. “It’s not enough.”

“Jack, you’ve been distracted and a fuckin’ pain in the ass. I can’t stand you right now. Go home.”

Jack stares at him in surprise. And then he smirks and shakes his head. “You are an asshole.”

“And I’m your partner. Go home.”

Jack glances at him again. Then he straightens his jacket and collar. “Listen, you’re right. And I shouldn’t have—”

“Already forgotten.” Will rubs at his throat and fixes his collar. Makes a throat-clearing noise. “You keep me on my toes.”

Jack shakes his head, his hands on his hips. “Okay. I’ll leave the car here, and go back with Bev and Jimmy.”

“Good.” Will glances at the door. “Now, we’ve got to go back in there and pretend to the locals that this is the plan and everything’s fine. Can you do that?”

“Yes. Stop bossin’ me around.”

“Stop needin’ it.” Will pushes the door open and steps inside, Jack on his heels.

“Katz, Price, we’re leaving our vehicle here, and I’ll be heading home with you this afternoon.”

The two forensic examiners blink in surprise.

Jack looks at Sheriff Mosley who’s opened his mouth to say something. “I’ll be working on this investigation from my office, where we have the technology available to us to cast a wider net and identify a possible pattern. Agent Graham will stay here as the ground investigator and your direct connection to FBI resources.”

Mosley’s frown grows angrier. “It sounds to me like you’re redirecting your energies elsewhere, and giving up on this serial killer we’ve got on our hands.”

“Just because someone kills more than one person does not make them a serial killer. Yes, these killings are ritualistic, and yes, there have been three…” Will trails off, realizing it’s dumb to fight against the term. Everything he says fits the definition of a serial killer. “Punishment. Retribution. The killer is targeting certain people for a reason. We need to figure it out, which means figuring out the connection between the three victims. He’s not an opportunistic killer. He may be suffering from psychosis. A God delusion.” The moment he says it, the moment he sees it; a puzzle piece sliding into place. He rises to his feet, his fingers flat against the tabletop. Exhilaration pumps through him, upturning the corners of his mouth and spurring his heart to beat faster as neurons snap and leap across his mind. “These people were unworthy to him. They offended him. Offended a god. His cooling off period has more to do with the cycles of the natural world—he’s not like others. He’s something different. Something god-like.”

“And what, you ready to worship him?” Mosley tosses him an ugly look before he walks out the door and slams it behind him.

Will turns to the rest. They’re staring at him with various expressions of concern. “Um, lunch?”

Zeller gets up without speaking and follows Mosley out the door.

Bev and Jimmy look at Will guiltily. “I think we’re getting lunch on the road,” Beverly says. “As soon as Jack is ready to leave.”

“Cowards,” Will says. His heart is still beating fast, but he tries to ignore it. “You’re avoiding Betty’s.”

“Will, Will, Will,” Jimmy tuts. “You might have the willpower to withstand yet another lunch at Betty’s, but I need actual nourishment! Flavor! My taste buds are dying for a juicy burger with toppings and terrible bread!”

He brushes back curls from his forehead, drawing in a deep breath. “I hate all of you.”

Which, apparently, is the right thing to say, because Bev replies with, “You love us,” The tension in the room fades like fog in the sun.

Jack is still quiet, though.

“Jack,” Will says.

“What?” Jack startles.

“Get packed. I’m tired of looking at your face.”

Jack doesn’t smile. He nods and goes out the door.

“What was that all about?” Beverly asks.

“Is it Bella?” Jimmy follows up.

Will presses his lips together. “Just don’t let him stew too long. Distract him in the car when you can.”

“You got it,” Bev says.

“Oh, we can play ‘I Spy’!” Jimmy exclaims.

“I do have a gun and will shoot you,” Bev replies. “Let’s get going before Will tries to guilt us again for lunch at Betty’s.”

“Copy.” Jimmy stands and heads for the door.

Beverly walks over to Will and throws her arms around him. “Don’t work too hard.” He returns the hug.

Then he sits, and looks at the evidence photos spread across the table.

A God delusion.

“Hi, handsome!” A sunflower-printed handkerchief holds Jolene’s wild red hair in place, and her nails are painted bright pink. “Glad you could join us for lunch again.”

Will almost says it’s the only place in town to get lunch, but he bites down on the reply. Instead, he says, “Nice to see you, Jolene.”

“How’s the investigation going?” She flips his coffee mug up and pours from the carafe.

“It’s going. Hey, listen, did Madeleine Goddard ever come into town?”

“That’s the woman, right? Poor thing. I didn’t recognize her photo in the paper, if that’s what you mean. And I think I would have remembered her. We get so few visitors.”

“Hm. Well, would you mind asking around a bit and letting me know?”

“Oooh, like an informant?” She winks at him.

“Sure,” he says, with a small laugh.

“You by your lonesome today?”

“I am. Everyone else went back to Lexington. Still working the case, just from the office.”

“You at that dinky motel over on 25?”

“I am.”

“You should check into my place.”

“Oh, I couldn’t take from your business, and—”

“Nonsense. It’s got a garage apartment where my son was staying. He’s just moved into his girlfriend’s place. It’ll be cheaper than that motel, nicer, and a little closer to town.”

“Jolene, you don’t have to—”

“I insist, Agent Graham. It’s the least our town can do while you investigate these murders.” Her voice lowers and she leans closer. “And stop a possible serial killer.” She straightens. “My boy is friends with Bobby Avery, you know. Says he ain’t ever seen Bobby so shook up. It’s the least I can do, personally, to welcome you to this town.”

Will digests that little piece of info, and then he decides. “Well, please call me Will, then.”

Jolene's smile brightens. "Listen, I'm off at three. I'll be up until nine at my place. Come see the room when you've got a moment, and I'll give you a key."

"You're really too kind, ma'am."

"No ma'am, I told you."

Will laughs at himself. "Yes, Jolene."

Will thought about returning to his little motel room, but when he did, he found himself packing his few things and heading toward Jolene's B&B.

She's thrilled to see him. "Agent Graham! Good of you to come. I've brought home dinner, and I'm inviting you to eat it with me."

Jimmy's kindly left him half a box of Luna bars. Will's shoveled down three since lunch. "Uh, that's very kind of you." His stomach growls.

Jolene smirks. "I'll take that as a yes. And just so you know, I've got spices in my house, so it needn't be as bland as my sister makes it."

Will bites down on his lip to keep from laughing as he follows Jolene into the main house.

Dinner is pork chop over mashed potatoes. The chop is dry, but Jolene adds butter and salt to the mashed potatoes to help make them creamier and tastier. "My sister took over the diner after our dad died. Neither of them had that great of a sense of taste, if you ask me, but my pa at least put salt in the food. Betty says she doesn't want to be responsible for anyone's blood pressure, so they can salt it if they want to at the table."

"Thank goodness she leaves shakers on the table, then," Will says.

"Her cooking does take some getting used to. It's a wonder that diner gets as many patrons as it does." Jolene's eyes twinkle. Then turn serious. "Thanks for joining me for dinner. I must admit, now that Noah's really gone, and Leah's so busy with her kids, I eat alone a lot. My friend Matilda joins me on weekends, but on weeknights she's got her own family to care for."

"Well, I appreciate your invitation." Will's eyes catch on a large framed photograph on the kitchen wall. It's Jolene, years younger. Flaming red hair and a pretty face. Beside her is a dark haired man with bright, blue eyes. Arrayed in a line in front of them are three children. Two teen girls, and a boy on the cusp of puberty. All red-headed, with the man's blue eyes.

"That's Neal. He died of a heart attack five years ago," Jolene says.

"Sorry for your loss." Will's tone adopts that professional, G-man cadence. He hates it, just a little bit. It's robotic. Unintentional. But it gets an agent through some of the rougher spots of the job.

Jolene doesn't seem to notice. She goes on. "The oldest girl is Miriam. She ran off some years ago. Meth. I'm not sure if she's dead or alive now. Leah is married and has a couple babies of her own. And that little one with the mischief in his eye is my Noah." She turns to Will. "You have family?"

Will shifts. A perennial question in his own mind. “Growing up was just me and my dad. And now the job doesn’t leave a lot of room for dating.”

“Oh, a handsome young man like you? The girls must be throwing themselves in your way.”

Will shakes his head with a soft chuckle. “Not the right ones.”

“Oh, have standards, do you?” she teases. “Well, standards are a good thing.”

Will shrugs. “The job takes up a lot of my time, and there are unplanned trips like this one. Not sure anyone could stand it.”

“So, none of your coworkers have spouses?”

“I didn’t say that.” How does he explain that it's less about the job, and more that his heart isn't built for the gay hookup scene? "There's plenty of fish n the sea," Jack once repeated. But this isn't a sea. His dating pool is more like a shallow puddle. It's not easy to find fish that can withstand life in a tiny puddle.

Or something like that.

“Mm.” Jolene takes a sip of her pop. “What about that partner of yours? He’s a looker.”

“Married,” Will admits. Sometimes, only sometimes, he finds himself a little jealous of Jack and Bella. Even with Bella's terrible disease.

“Interesting,” Jolene says, only slightly smug. Will drops his guard a little to read her. She’s enjoying herself alright, and she genuinely likes him. Her sweet aunt-like affection surprises him. He suspected she wanted him here so she could brag to other gossips in town. *“I got the FBI man over at my place.”* He could picture her holding court with other nosey people, eyes growing wide as she hints she knows more about the FBI investigation than anyone.

But it’s not like that. She’s genuinely concerned for him.

But he doesn’t want to examine why he doesn’t have a partner any further. It’s bad enough that every time he thinks he’s making a connection with someone, found that puddle fish, they turn out to be a frog. Or something. It's not worth thinking about.

When they’ve finished eating, Jolene clears the dishes and rebukes him for offering to wash up. She leads him instead to the outside of the garage where there’s a door with its own lock separate from the house.

She unlocks it and he follows her up the stairs.

“I’ve given it a good cleaning,” Jolene says. Will’s met with the sight of an old box television in the corner, pointed toward a rocking chair draped in a crocheted throw. A bed covered in a colorful rag quilt stands in the corner, shadowed by the canted roof. As he walks around, he catches sight of a mousetrap behind the nightstand, but overall, the place is clean and cute. And best of all, it’s private. And cheap.

“You won’t be bothered here. Noah’s pretty stuck on his girl. My daughter Leah comes by to visit me, but she never comes up here. We have some guests scheduled for this weekend, but they’ll be in the main house. I stay on the ground floor of the house in a set of my own rooms.”

No second husband, then.

“Well, do we have a deal?”

“I’ll take it.”

Jolene grins. “Happy to have you! Why don’t you get your stuff and make yourself comfortable. I’ll be inside the main house prepping for guests. Will you be in tonight or out investigating?”

“I’ll be in tonight.” He spent the afternoon poring through Madeleine Goddard’s cell phone records with a morose Deputy Zeller. He’s owed a good rest.

“Great! Here’s the key.” She hands it to him. Her fingers are as warm as her personality. “Welcome to Jackson B&B.”

“Thanks.” Will usually likes to keep his distance, but Jolene is a force to reckon with, and in a way, he’s glad of it.

Will later opens his eyes to darkness. As they adjust, he can make out lines of the room’s furniture. The box television. The dresser.

He’s at Jolene’s. In the apartment over the garage.

In the corner, though, something isn’t right. A tall something. Dark. A silhouette of...is it a man?

Will swallows. His gun is on the bedside table. Loaded, safety on.

He peers at the corner, squinting. Something moves. His pulse pounds in his ears. The shadow moves, slow, snail-like. Eyes glimmer. Twin blue flames framed in the blackness of night. The shadow peels itself away from the wall, as tall as the stag—

Will shoots up in bed and snatches his gun from the nightstand. When he points it at the thing, it’s running for the stairs. A wail, like a child screaming, fills his ears, rings through the apartment. He jumps from the bed. Follows the thunder of footsteps down the stairs and throws open the door.

“Freeze! FBI!” he shouts.

At the edge of the wood is the small boy with a lantern. He still wears overalls, and a vintage miner's cap.

Will gawks. Lowers his gun.

"Who goes there?" Jolene's voice, full of anger, rolls across the yard like thunder.

Will can see her moonlit silhouette in the back door of the main house. He looks back at the woods. The boy's gone. The lantern no longer lit.

"That you, Will?" Jolene calls.

"It's me." Will's voice is like a rasp of gravel. His heart bangs against his breastbone. "It's me," he says louder.

"What is it? Did you see someone?"

"Did you?" His voice is accusatory, which he doesn't mean to be, but his nerves jangle and his mind judders in every direction. "I...someone was in my room and they ran down the stairs. You didn't see anyone come out of this door?"

"You're the only one I've seen out here." She's out the door and crossing the yard to him, a shotgun nestled in the crook of her arm. When she's a mere couple yards from him, away. "I was smoking in the kitchen. My little secret, you hear? When you threw open the door and came out. I didn't see nothin' else, but you had your gun out and was yellin' freeze. Thought maybe you saw something through your window, saw someone in the woods." She hefts the gun. "Thought you could use back up."

Will's eyes widen. "Jolene, I appreciate the thought, but—"

"But nothing. I have a right to defend my property."

Will looks to the woods again. He sees only the darkness. The crooked silhouettes of trees and brush. Nothing else. "You really didn't see anyone running out my door?"

"Just you."

Am I hallucinating? Is it ghosts? "Why do you have your gun?" The adrenaline is wearing off, tiring him. A trembling tension in his muscles takes its place.

"I keep it with me at night in case I see a 'coon or a 'possum coming for the trash cans. Scares them off."

Will balks. "What about your guests?"

"Asleep, I would guess." Jolene pulls out a cigarette and lights it. Her hands are steady. "I keep it with me because you never know what's lurkin' in these woods. I've seen some things. When I come out here by myself at night, I keep the gun with me so I feel safe."

"What things?"

“Bears.” She’s lying. She’s not even really bothering to hide it. Just not willing to talk about what she’s seen.

“Okay.” Will swallows. “Sorry if I bothered you. I should get back to bed.”

Jolene tips her head, cigarette hanging from her lip. “You sure you don’t wanna stay up a while? Have some tea? I got chamomile.”

“Oh. No. Thank you. I’ve got to get back to sleep.”

She seems to be studying him in the low light of the moon. Then she gives a sharp nod. “You do that. I’m about to turn in m’self.”

“Right. Goodnight.” He turns on his heel. After all, he’s said it. He has to go back up in that room. Can’t be out here letting shadows spook him. Jolene’s a gossip, and it won’t look good for him if the town gets word that he’s afraid of the dark. Or that he’s seeing things.

With his luck, Hannibal’ll stop by for coffee in the morning, and he’ll be the first person she tells.

A groan escapes him as he opens the door and steps inside. Closing the door plunges the stairwell into pitch darkness. He hits the switch so light floods the way.

He takes each step quietly, holding his breath until he reaches the landing and turns into the room. He strides over to the lamp and pulls the chain.

Nothing’s moved in the room. Every piece of furniture in its place, his bag on the floor, his watch, wallet, and phone on the nightstand. No sign of anyone.

Was he dreaming? Was the whole thing a farce invented by his overactive imagination?

He throws himself on the bed, gun still in hand, and stares at the ceiling.

The dawn doesn’t come soon enough.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Sincerest apologies for posting two days late---between working and Halloween-related activities and physical therapy, these recent days were very busy! Here is chapter 8!

The mirror reflects Will's struggle with his dark curls, half-tamed with gel. At least his beard is silky soft and smoothed in one direction. The charcoal pants he wears are the ones sewn by Hannibal. With his dark long-sleeved shirt and black jacket, it's the best he can do for a funeral.

It's Saturday, two days after the disturbance at Jolene's. Nothing's happened since, aside from the daily work of checking alibis and phone records and cameras.

Well, nothing's happened aside from the sense of being watched. Whatever watches him lurks in the woodland murk. Will can't pinpoint the source, but then he's often barraged by the emotions of those around him. At the station, Sheriff Mosley's volatile chill swirls with the damp worries of Deputy Zeller. Other people in town swamp Will with waves of curiosity and old resentment of a government entity.

This running onslaught is exactly why Will likes living alone. As a boy, he'd played 'house' with Mary Rose and Lily May Hatfield from down the road, most often playing the part of husband to Mary Rose. Mary Rose was a year older, and ran their activities with an assertive focus that neither Will nor Lily May had the gumption to deny. Lily May, younger than him by two years, played the role of their child, and the three of them aped at grocery shopping, housecleaning, and cooking. Sometimes they pretended he went on a fishing or hunting trip, and then Mary Rose prepared a "feast" while Will read Lily May a story. When Will was six, Mary Rose and Lily May's father sniped at him for being a sissy, and told him to go home and learn how to be a man. The shame and the confusion that swelled in his belly nearly knocked the breath from him. He'd gone home, wondering how he'd know how to have a family without the practice. It didn't occur to him that most men had families whether they were ready or not.

It doesn't matter now, because Will can't shield himself forever against the psyches of others. Living with a partner and children would mean no space for him to sit comfortably in his own skin, thinking his own thoughts and feeling his own feelings. Alone suits him, even if the loneliness gets like swallowing tacks.

A knock at the downstairs door pulls him to the present. He stuffs his wallet and keys in his coat pocket before heading down the steps.

Jolene's outside, outfitted in a black dress with short black heels. Sensible. Her makeup is subtle, not the bright pinks and fuschias she normally wears to the diner. She smiles to see him. "Well, aren't you dashing?"

"The best I could do with what I've brought." Will says, and ducks his head. Jolene's a big flirt with everyone, but he can't stop the blushes anyway.

They'd decided, over another shared dinner, that Will'll follow Jolene's car over to the church and let her introduce him to some of the locals. She also filled him in on town gossip, to give him context for the introductions. It's nothing that directly helped him with the investigation, but nonetheless, it's entertaining. And he feels like he knows a little more about the town of Fire Creek and can do better by its citizens. Bill Ashcroft might not have been a favorite son, but the town itself seems to have its share of good people.

They pull up to Jerry Popplewell's church. Behind the church proper is a small reception hall. At the doorway, Jolene introduces Will to Matilda Mckee, a round-faced, round-bodied woman with a seemingly tireless smile. Matilda's blue eyes widen to see him, and a pointed eagerness becomes obvious in the quirk of her smile.

Before long, the three of them are surrounded by more women. Some from the local garden club, others from the knitting circle, still more from the festival planning board. Each of them eye him hungrily, ask him pointed questions about possible family connections and whether he's married. And, *Oh, by the way, does the FBI have a lead?*

Will manages to sidestep most of the questions with vague answers until Jolene finally rescues him and takes him to the side, away from the garrulous hangers-on.

"Don't think I don't know what's happening here," Will says. "You're one of them, and you're using me for cool points."

Jolene gives him a toothy smile. "Please, sugar, I was cool long before you got here." Will huffs a laugh, and Jolene links her arm in his.

The grey-faced Averys, Bobby and Rhonda, stand rigidly nearby. Bobby doesn't look at him. Rhonda gives him a polite, unsmiling nod of acknowledgment. Bobby's girlfriend, Addison McKee, stands beside her beau, stroking Bobby's arm while staring into the middle distance. It's then that Will can see the resemblance between her and her mother, Matilda. Dishwater blonde hair, thin lips, and brilliant blue eyes.

Everyone is washed and coiffed, milling around outside the church in the warm May air. The church doors are open, but most seem reluctant to enter. As 10:30 am approaches, the people file in with quiet sighs of resignation.

In the front pew sit Melinda and Harry Ashcroft, their faces pointed toward the pulpit. Jolene sits midway with Matilda while Will slides into a pew at the back.

While Jerry begins his sermon, voice rising and falling like notes on an accordion, Will examines a nearby stained glass window. It's odd, a decorative stained glass window of this size in this kind of church. It might be the Resurrection, the central character rising from the

stone vault where his body had lain. Lightning cuts a jag through grey clouds. The central character, messianic in their depiction, looms largest, an ivy-entwined staff in one hand and a golden goblet in the other. His heart glows red. At his sandaled feet are monstrous, humanoid creatures, perhaps under the ground, perhaps demons in hell. Will wracks his brain for possible interpretations, coming up strangely empty. It unsettles him, the idea of not knowing what it means. It seems threatening, somehow, as if he might end up one of those pitiless creatures below if he doesn't take care.

While he looks, the eyes of the Messiah move, locking onto his gazee. The stained glass moue of a mouth opens as if to speak.

Will gasps and whips his head away. A nearby parishioner catches his eye. Will clears his throat and nods his head, then lets his eyes drop to the floor. Scuffed from many years of soles. He glances again to the window, but nothing moves.

A hymnal sits in the rack. Will pulls it from its place and lets it flip open to a random page.

Once I was captured by the foe,

Death's prisoner, enslaved by sin;

But in compassion, tenderly,

God brought me back to Christ again!

I am reborn! What wondrous grace!

New spirit and new heart He gave!

His Spirit into mine's been placed;

His nature I may now partake!

With water clean He sprinkled me;

From filth and idols set me free.

Stone heart with heart of flesh replaced;

His new creation making me!

Yes, God Himself is now my life;

His nature is forever mine.

All His commands I can fulfill,

Since I possess His life divine!

He is my God and I am His;

Our fellowship—how near, how dear.

He is my blessed portion full;

I'll never leave Him, never veer!

God's Christ is now my dwelling place;

He is my bountiful supply.

By eating Him, the bread of life,

I am forever satisfied!

By eating Him, the bread of life, I am forever satisfied. A shiver runs up his spine and he puts it back in the rack. His stomach growls, aching for a little sustenance since coffee was his only breakfast.

Relief washes through him when the service ends. The coffin is carried out and the mourners follow. Will stands back to be respectful, but his eyes search the crowd for anyone who seems out of place.

After the coffin is lowered into the grave, everyone heads for the reception hall. Will's mouth waters with the smoldering scent of barbeque. It seems about eighty people in the hall, but he manages to avoid talking to anyone else until Zeller approaches him. "Well, see anyone suspicious?"

"Do you?" Will shoots back. He pulls at his collar. "You live here. Anyone here that you didn't think would be?"

"Looks like most of the usual folks. The long-time church-goers who'll go to anyone's funeral. I see old friends of Melinda's, though she hasn't given them the time of day since marrying Bill, or so I've heard. There's some people who've worked for them over the years. Melinda's cousins are here, too. Some neighbors. Nobody that shouldn't be."

"Get out!" A thunderous shout turns the heads of the crowd.

“I’ve got a right to be here, Harry.” It’s Sheriff Mosley, and he’s squared off with Harry Ashcroft, face glowering and hands settled on his hips. “You can’t go pushing anyone you don’t like out of church.”

“Harry, please.” Melinda’s at Harry’s side, her voice low and angry. He shakes her off.

“He should be out there finding Billy’s killer!” Harry is red-faced, trying to use his height to tower over and intimidate the sheriff. Mosley isn’t cowed. He’s as still as a mountain. With mountainous muscle mass, too.

“Jesus Christ,” Zeller says, and heads for the confrontation. Zeller is tall but whip-thin and wiry with a weaselly face. He doesn’t have the inherent authority that Harry and Mosley carry, but Will has to admire the man for trying.

The crowd i s silent as Harry blusters and wails. “He’s not out finding his killer! Useless fuckin’ sheriff and deputies we have here!” Harry catches sight of Will. “Not that the FBI is doing much better.”

Will sighs. Well, this is not how he thought the funeral would go, at all.

Zeller stands at the sheriff’s side, and says something Will can’t hear. Harry’s jaw sets and he turns away, eyes flaring with rage. Melinda hisses low words to him, but Harry seems as if he’s beyond hearing.

Mosley shakes his head. “I’ll go, Harry, to keep the peace. But you would do better to show the law some respect.”

Harry scoffs and starts to turn, but Melina yanks on his arm and glares hotly.

Zeller walks with Mosley out the door.

A bell clangs at the front of the hall. Jolene stands there, cowbell in hand. “Food’s ready, folks, so please step this way and form a line.”

Murmurs break out across the crowd as people begin to line up. No one approaches the Ashcrofts. Harry shakes Melinda off and stomps toward the door that’s marked Bathroom.

Will takes his chance.

Melinda’s eyes widen when she sees him coming. “Agent Graham.”

“Hello. I’m here to give my condolences once again, Ms. Ashcroft.”

“Thank you,” she says. “Harry is...taking it very hard.”

“Understandable. I don’t judge.”

“Hm. Thank you.” Her eyes look him over, assessing. Whatever she finds seems to appease her well enough, as she gestures toward the line with a quick flourish of one hand. “Won’t you eat something? Our neighbor Hannibal Lecter came to cook today, and he is wonderful.”

Will glances at the people behind the buffet table. Sure enough, Hannibal stands at the carving station, speaking cordially to people as he serves them slices of beef. It's almost enough to make Will groan. He oughta go back to his apartment and snack on some stashed chips, but honestly the food here smells too good. He's gotta eat.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll speak with you again soon." Melinda nods as he heads for the back of the line.

When he reaches the carving station and holds out his plate, Hannibal's eyes narrow to see him. "Hello, stranger. I don't believe we've met. I'm Hannibal Lecter."

Will bites down on a smile. He deserved that. "I'm sorry about the other day. It wasn't…"

"You hadn't told your partner you spent the night at my cabin."

Heat burns Will's ears. It sounds salacious, rolling out of Hannibal's mouth like that. "Yeah. Bit embarrassing that I almost lost myself in the woods."

"Do you embarrass easily?"

Will can't help but think of Jolene's flirtatious jabs. "Lately? Yeah, seems to be a thing."

Hannibal puts a cut of beef on his plate, smiling. "I'm glad I could help you save face."

"I appreciate that." Will's holding up the line, but something about the warm brown of Hannibal's eyes makes him want to linger. "Well, maybe I'll see you around."

"It would be my pleasure, Will."

The interaction leaves him feeling a mix of nervous and empty. Like he's left something at the carving station. He sits in a corner of the room and stares at his plate, the only thing on it the beef from Hannibal.

When he finally takes a bite, someone comes to a stand beside him. "May I join you?"

It's Hannibal. Will wipes his mouth with a napkin and gestures to the chair hurriedly. His mouth is still half-full when he says,"Yes. Please. Sit down."

Hannibal eyes Will's plate. His own plate is colorful, his beef wreathed by dark greens, carrots, and beans.

"Ah, I haven't been eating a lot lately. But this tastes amazing." It does. The beef is tender and moist. The flavor enhanced by whatever spices were used, without any of those spices overwhelming the taste. "Honestly, the best thing I've eaten since arriving here." The other best thing he's eaten was the breakfast Hannibal made for him that morning, but Will decides against mentioning it.

"Thank you," Hannibal says. "Cooking is one of my passions."

What could his other passions be? Will takes a bite of food to prevent himself from saying something stupid. When he's finished chewing, he ventures with a curious remark. "You know, I'm sort of surprised to see you here."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "The Ashcrofts are my neighbors. I thought it a kindness to provide food in their time of need."

"True. But are you friends? Did you know Bill Ashcroft better than you let on?"

Hannibal tilts his head. "Is this an interrogation?"

Will shakes his head. "No. Sorry. Sometimes it's hard to turn it off."

"Certainly." Hannibal breaks apart a roll and begins to butter it. Will finds himself watching the man's long fingers, the veins in his hands, the tiny bones flexing beneath his skin. "I've known the Ashcrofts my entire life. When someone in the community dies, you feel compelled to honor them in some way. Don't you think?"

Will's community is fragmented. His dad still fixes cars back in West Virginia. Drinks and plays poker and watches football on the weekends with some buddies of his.

The other part of his community mostly consists of coworkers: particularly Jack, Beverly, and Jimmy. But also Jack's wife, Bella, who he used to visit for dinner before she began her treatment for cancer. They're not tight-knit, but they're who he has.

"Sure," he says, without confessing his thoughts.

Hannibal takes a bite of his food. He closes his eyes in some semblance of ecstasy as he does. Will scrambles for a new topic, trying to ignore the effect Hannibal has on him. "I hear you're the best cook in town."

The corner of Hannibal's mouth lifts. "Listening to town gossip, then?"

"Is it gossip if it's the undeniable truth?"

"Your faith in me is gratifying. Would you care for a demonstration?"

Will indicates his plate. "What I just ate? I believe I said it was the best thing I've eaten since coming to this town."

"I'm inviting you to dinner."

Will blinks. Hannibal smirks.

"I don't mean to put you out," Will says. "You've already done enough for me."

"Nonsense. I enjoy cooking, and I enjoy cooking for others. I don't get to do it nearly as often as I would like. Allow me to prepare you a proper dinner." Hannibal takes another bite of beef, his tongue touching the tines of his fork when he does.

The sight makes Will swallow. Hannibal's magnetic. Alluring, with those oxblood brown eyes and handsome, chiseled features. Will can't decide if he wants to be pinned beneath him, or to throw him down on the bed and have his way with him.

Both, maybe.

"Speechless?" Hannibal's eyebrows raise in question. Will realizes he's been staring and yanks his gaze down to his lap.

Maybe I oughta tell him I'm gay. Would Hannibal be disgusted? Would he think Will was warning him or hitting on him? But…what if Hannibal doesn't mind?

Just take it slow. Will draws a breath. "Just thinking. And I think I'd like that very much."

Hannibal's face brightens. "Excellent. Come by after the reception. I'll cook for you tonight."

"Uh. Okay. Thanks."

"Unless Ms. Jackson is expecting you for dinner?"

"No, no we don't have an arrangement or anything." Will fumbles over his words and grabs his drink for a sip to try and save himself.

"I'm most pleased." Hannibal lays his silverware on his plate, having somehow already finished his meal. "You have the address, of course."

"Yes."

"I'm going to help with cleaning up and then I'll head home. You may come to mine anytime after 3. I have an excellent brew I am eager to share with a new friend."

"Uh, sure."

Hannibal inclines his head, collects his cutlery, and stands. "Until this afternoon, Agent Graham."

"See you then." Will smiles, trying to broadcast confidence and surety. When Hannibal turns, Will sags. Nerves skitter along his skin and his hands turn clammy. It's gonna be a long afternoon.

Leaving the reception is like drawing in a breath of fresh air. Will gets into his car and heads to the apartment. It's the opposite direction of Hannibal's, and Will feels like a thread stretches between him and that cabin in the woods. It grows tauter by the mile, but he makes it out of town and onto the road that leads to Jolene's B&B. By the time he's parked and entering his apartment, his chest is tight and his steps are sluggish.

He circles around in the middle of the apartment. He's already wearing his best clothes and he doesn't want to change. He refreshes his deodorant, checks his hair, and then he sits on the end of the bed.

It isn't long before he yanks off all of his clothes, steps into the shower, cleans himself thoroughly, and gets back out, only to put on the exact same outfit and style his hair. He pauses, then exchanges the black long-sleeved shirt for a burgundy button-down. He leaves the top button unbuttoned, and spritzes the lightest bit of cologne.

It's 3 pm. He flexes his fingers, grabs his car keys, and heads to the driveway.

Chapter 9

Hannibal comes out onto the porch to greet him. “I’m so glad you’ve arrived.” He holds a green, unlabeled bottle in hand. “It’s a lambic I’ve brewed myself.”

Will takes it with a grin. “I’m sure it’s helpful to have your own brewing system in a dry county.”

“I’ve tested quite a few recipes.” Hannibal smiles in return. “This one makes use of the raspberries from the fall.”

Will tastes it. It’s effervescent, delectably sour, with the hint of sweet, tart raspberry flavor. “It’s delicious.”

Hannibal nods his thanks and opens the door.

“What’s for dinner?”

“I have spent some long weeks experimenting in my kitchen, particularly with the flavors of the local terroir. I thought for tonight we might make use of my experiments with a tapas theme.”

Will’s brows shoot to his hairline. “Tapas?”

“Tapas.”

“Okay.” Will takes another sip of the fizzy lambic. “I am prepared to be dazzled.”

Hannibal makes a small noise that might be laughter.

Nyx is splendid company. So is Hannibal, but Will finds his eyes drawn again and again to the dog pressed against his leg.

“She’s gorgeous,” he says. “A lab mix?”

“Some sort of mix,” Hannibal replies. He’s got multiple dishes going on the stove, and more bowls of spices and greens and exotic looking ingredients on the counters and the kitchen table. “I found her deep in the holler one night. A lone pup. Took her home, and she’s been my companion ever since.”

“Mm.” Will reaches down and strokes the warm, dark fur behind her ears.

“Do you have a dog?”

“Nah. Can’t with the job. Too much time away from home, too much unexpected traveling.”

“That’s too bad. You seem suited to them.”

Will lifts one shoulder. “I’ve always wanted one. Maybe someday.”

Hannibal dips his chin. “Perhaps.”

“So, you sure you don’t want help?”

“I have found my own rhythm when working in the kitchen. It is very much like contemplative meditation. It relaxes me. I enjoy it.” He smiles up at Will. “Though I am grateful for your presence. Company is appreciated. I sometimes lose myself too long in my hours here.”

“You never get lonely?”

Hannibal's secret, small smile lingers. “I am very used to my company, and I rather enjoy it. But I have many neighbors. These mountains are full of life.”

“So you’re not just talking about the Ashcrofts?”

“No. Though they count among my neighbors, certainly.” He’s frying something in a pan, and switches it to a different burner. Then turns to the refrigerator and pulls out a glass container of something thick and white. “There’s more in these mountains than people.”

Will’s mind runs to the stag and the boy with the lantern. He’s no “people,” as human as his face looks. Will represses a shudder, hides his grimace with a sip from his bottle.

“They are beautiful mountains,” he says. “Though have you seen the Rockies? Magnificent.”

“No doubt,” Hannibal says. “They’re young, like youths who feel the need to prove themselves, and so they rear up to their greatest height, intimidating others with their size and vigor.”

Will snorts a laugh. “Okay. If the Rockies are teens, what are the Appalachians?”

“Elders. Bystanders of time and evolution. The testimony they could give if we could listen and hear their language.” Hannibal pauses, his eyes shifting to the window. “These mountains formed before dinosaurs walked the earth. They began forming before life walked on land. While some may refer to stones as the bones of mountains, these mountains are older than bone.”

A chill ripples through Will. His hairs stand on end. “You’re giving me goosebumps.”

Hannibal’s gaze lands on him. “Good. It means you’re listening.”

Okay. Quirky. Will takes another sip, finding his bottle empty. Living alone for such a long time on a mountain probably does that to a person; makes them quirky. This guy's probably had a lot of time to ponder on mountain-specific philosophies.

"What are you thinking?" Hannibal asks.

Will can feel a corner of his lip lift. "That I didn't expect to meet anyone like you in this town."

Hannibal grins. His teeth seem strangely sharp. More pointed than most. "I'm glad I could surprise you, Will."

Dinner is fantastic, if unusual. Small plates are adorned with delicate greens, tiny blossoms, and carefully cooked meats. Hannibal waves a hand over each dish and pronounces the names of the foods: "Roasted morels on a bed of garlic mustard and wild radish sprouts." It's delicious. "Unripe figs in elderberry syrup, goat cheese curdled with fig sap, water mint, and mugwort beer syrup." Will lifts an eyebrow. A green fig sits atop crumbled cheese, anointed with green mint.

Each dish sounds more extravagant than the last, though these plates hold only a sample size of food on each. "Steamed trout with sweet white clover and sea salt, accompanied by wild radish flowers and fermented elderberry capers in a kimchi broth." "Broiled snails in garlic butter, smoked with red clover blossoms." "Cricket croquette on a bed of parsley and violet leaves." Finally, "rabbit leg braised with mugwort beer, honey, rosemary, and dandelion greens."

Will stares. "Wait, did you say cricket croquette?"

Hannibal tilts his head. "An excellent protein choice in a world facing climate change and population increase."

"And you've been talking about the local terroir. Are these...local crickets?"

Hannibal chuckles. It's low, quiet, and throaty. Will's cock gives an interested twitch. "I got them from the backyard."

A noise tries to escape from Will's throat, but he pushes it down, or nearly manages it. Hannibal won't avert his eyes, obviously curious to see what Will will do.

Will battles a smile as he picks up a fork, cuts into the croquette and brings it to his lips. It's crispy and well-seasoned, delicious on his tongue. He tries not to think of insect legs, or the

dirty crickets he's seen kept in cages as lizard food.

"That's actually...not bad." He licks the tine of the fork, and doesn't miss the way Hannibal follows the movement of his tongue. "I could eat more of that."

"A hearty endorsement," Hannibal teases.

Will laughs. They're accompanied by glasses of Hannibals's homebrewed dandelion wine. "You spend a lot of time cooking and brewing, huh?"

"I do. I prefer to work with my hands as much as possible."

Will casts an eye over the room. "So, you make drinks, food, and play the hammered dulcimer? And the clay figures outside?"

"Yes. I have very few obligations. I go into town once in a while for a music fest or to do some shopping. Otherwise, I prefer to create in my studio, tend to my garden, practice music, or test recipes in my kitchen." He holds the wine up to the light. It's clear and light golden yellow. "I am very fortunate."

Will still can't help but think that it sounds lonely.

Or, maybe he's just hoping Hannibal is lonely. Because then...yeah...then Hannibal might be even more welcoming of Will's company. Want to see more of him, despite his hermited lifestyle.

To what end? This can't go anywhere. Will's only in town for maybe a week longer as he investigates Madeleine Goddard's end of things, hopefully finds the common thread binding the three victims together so that they might catch the sonuvabitch out here flaying people and hanging them in trees.

He fingers the stem of his wine glass.

"What do you do in your spare time?" Hannibal asks.

"I—" What does he do? "I don't get a lot of that. I tend to work as much as I can. On a lot of Sundays I go over to Jack's for dinner with his wife." Though it's been some time since they've done that. "I go out to the bar with friends, sometimes." Beverly and Jimmy drag him out on occasion. "And I read books."

"On what subjects?" Hannibal's dark eyes gleam.

"Uh, well, a lot of nonfiction. Sort of, whatever I pick up in library book sales or used bookstores. I just read Grant's memoir, and then a book on American intelligence and the making of the nuclear bomb." Will selects a broiled snail from one plate, and a cut of the trout from another. "I picked up an interesting one last week. About the communication of our culture to potential alien lifeforms, and how that might look a millennia from now."

Hannibal seemed interested. "A niche subject, to be sure."

“Yeah, that’s one word for it.”

They spoke of desultory things, hopping from topic to topic as they ate their tapas. The goat cheese was creamy and minty. The rabbit fell apart in scrumptious pieces as he placed it in his mouth. The morels were meaty, and the broiled snails were delightful. Everything, as exotic as it seemed to Will, was local in one way or another. Plucked from Hannibal’s garden, purchased at a local farm, or foraged in the woods.

Will insists on helping with the clean up. The open floor plan makes it easy for them to move around the kitchen and the big island at the center. Will washes dishes while Hannibal dries and puts them away, wipes countertops, and sweeps the floor. Finally, the last dish is set in its place, and Will dries his hands on a small towel.

Hannibal pours them each a short glass of bourbon. “Infused with peach and pecan flavors,” he said as he handed Will his glass.

It’s a good bourbon, and the additions complicate it in scrumptious ways.

“I’d like to show you the view on the back deck.”

“Sure.”

Hannibal leads him down the hall, past the doors which lead to the bedroom and the bathroom, and out the glass door at the end.

As they step out into the crisp spring air, the view strikes Will. Overhead, it’s blue-black darkness pricked with white light. Beneath, lying in the valley with a stretch of trees between them, are the soft lights of the town. Porch lights, a couple streetlamps, some windows that are tiny from up here, but visible nonetheless. From where they’re standing, the town looks like an erratic pile of fairy lights, and the stars seem orderly. But it’s beautiful.

“You see,” Hannibal says. “I have everything I need.”

Will looks at him. Hannibal isn’t looking down at the town, or at the gorgeous night sky. He’s looking at Will.

“Yeah,” Will says. Clearly at a loss for words.

“But...need and want are two different things.” Hannibal studies Will, and Will tries not to buckle beneath the weight of the man’s gaze. It seems alien for a moment, like Hannibal’s deciphering Will’s expression and harboring secret judgments. But then it softens. Opens. Waits.

It hits Will. This is the first time he’s been able to read the emotions coming from Hannibal. This whole time, the man has been a respite. Calm, cool, controlled. All of his movements are fluid and deliberate. His words are careful and considered. Around Hannibal, Will can relax. He doesn’t absorb the man’s messy emotions or careless, erratic thoughts. None of that wafts off of him like it does other people. Instead, Will is only himself, and Hannibal a separate being, each living their separate lives.

How has he not noticed it before? He only knew what Hannibal could be feeling by what he said, whether he smiled or not, or lifted an eyebrow or angled his head. Is this how other people read emotions in a conversation?

The quiet is bliss. But how is Hannibal doing this?

And how did he just turn it off so suddenly Will could read him, could tell he's waiting and ready to follow Will's lead?

Can a person just learn to do that? Can Hannibal do that? How?

Why is Hannibal so unlike anyone else?

Something sticky and cold is brewing low in his gut, despite the welcoming warmth of Hannibal's gaze.

"Will?" Hannibal's voice is a low murmur.

Will ducks his chin, not able to reconcile his desire with this new knowledge of what Hannibal can do. "I should go."

"Should you?"

Will looks down at the drink in his hand. He's only had a few sips. The wine was pleasant during dinner, but he's not feeling tipsy. Only...spun about maybe. Surprised in a way that he doesn't like. A little drunk on a beautiful view and a beautiful man, suddenly sobered by the unusual color of a coming storm.

"It's alright. I can drive." He forces himself to look at Hannibal and smile. "Thank you so much for all of this. Between you and Jolene, a guy could get used to this." A laugh barks from his throat, a little too high. He hands his glass to Hannibal, who watches him. Still waiting, it seems. Not at all seeming perturbed or offended, only curious about what Will's doing.

Well, Mountain Man, nice to see you can stay rooted wherever you're planted.

Will rubs the back of his neck as he moves past Hannibal and into the house. He heads for the hook where his coat hangs. He can hear Hannibal's footsteps behind him, as quiet as they are. He has the sense the man is there, close to his back.

"Anyway," Will says, "thanks for a good night. It's, uh, been really good." He swings his coat on, one hand gesturing toward the kitchen. "Dinner was amazing." Nyx gives a low, sharp woof and bounds up to Will. He pats her head. "Your dog is amazing. Everything was amazing."

"Thank you," Hannibal says, still holding the two glasses with the peach-and-pecan infused bourbon. His expression is strangely placid. Not at all disappointed about Will's departure. A take-it-or-leave-it kind of guy.

Will tries to ignore the sting. Tries to ignore that Hannibal is unbothered.

“Thanks, again,” he says, opening the door. “I’m sure I’ll see you around town.” That’s a lie. Will’s not sure of anything. But it seems like the polite, not-weird thing to say, and he’s out the door, his ears burning and his head down as he traipses to his car.

A shadow joins him at his side. Nyx, escaped from the house, lopes along. Will turns around to see Hannibal silhouetted in his doorway.

“Nyx!” Hannibal calls. Will gives her one last rub behind the ears and opens his car door.

He tries not to look at Hannibal in the rearview mirror as he pulls down the drive.

How does he do it? How can he turn it off and on?

That bed in the apartment over Jolene’s garage is calling his name. Diving into the pillows and forgetting everything about this night sounds pretty awesome right about now.

He’s just looking for a night of fun. Probably likes no-strings attached sex.

He turns around a bend in the road.

Does he even know he’s doing it?

What if all that time Hannibal spends alone has allowed him to not turn off his emotions, but to dampen them, shield them, from people like Will. Maybe all the noise and chatter from other people are because they’re all tuned to the same frequency, and Hannibal’s channel is somewhere else.

It doesn’t matter, now. Not like he can go back up the mountain and say, “Hey, sorry about that. I freaked out for a minute because I thought you figured out I’m an empath and you were manipulating me by shielding your thoughts and emotions, but really I’m just a neurotic mess and you’ve got it so together that I can’t find your frequency.”

Yeah, that’d go over real well.

And even if by some miracle Hannibal still speaks to him, he’s probably not that interested in anything else besides a one-night stand. Which is not Will’s MO.

Then again, maybe a night in Hannibal’s bed would let Will get him out of his system before he goes back to the BAU.

Not a good idea!

Yeah. Okay. Probably not a good idea. So it’s settled. He’ll get back to work and stop daydreaming about Hannibal Lecter. Get his head in the game.

Decided, Will tightens his grip on the steering wheel, and descends the mountain into the valley.

The taste of bourbon and peaches lingers on his tongue, and the gleam of Hannibal’s eyes seem to follow him in the dark.

Chapter 10

It's frigid. Dark. Will's limbs move like cold molasses. When he opens his mouth, air emerges in slow, slick bubbles.

He's underwater.

He tosses his head, not sure which way is up. Does he remember how to swim?

He did learn. It was in a clear swimming pool at a friend's house. "Richie Rich," they called his friend. The kid's name was Rich and his house was the biggest one in town. But Will had to learn how to swim in order to be allowed in the pool, and it was Rich's mom who taught him. Will didn't go swimming unless he could see straight through to the bottom, and while he didn't quite understand why those things that were in the river were not in anyone's pool, he reasoned that maybe they didn't like the chlorine.

It was the only way he got to enjoy the freedom of spinning his arms, sliding through water slippery as a fish.

Will's a strong swimmer. But here, with the water as dark as it is, there's no way to tell which way is up. Will starts pumping his legs, hoping he'll reach the surface before he runs out of air. He ignores the shifting of shadows, the see-saw movement of other swimmers.

Until one seems to emerge in front of him. Antlered.

The stag? What's it doing?

Then the eyes open, and it's flame-red eyes on a man's face, antlers curving up from his head like tall trees lining the curve of a mountain.

Will screams. The water fills his mouth before he can scream again.

Will knocks on the door. He's in Barbourville, a larger town twenty-five minutes from Fire Creek.

A woman with peroxide blonde hair and bright red lips opens the door. Her face is round like the moon, and her eyes are two dark pools. Will's immediately swamped with a sense of suction, like the woman's vibe is to sucker like a barnacle to any passing ship. "Can I help you?"

"Agent Will Graham," he says, holding up his badge. "Phoebe Hanes? We spoke on the phone."

“Yessir, please come in.” She opens the door wider and disappears down the hall. Will follows, but he’s already putting up shields against the woman’s acute neediness. “You’re welcome to sit down. I made sweet tea this morning.”

“Thank you.”

She reappears with two tall glasses, ice clinking, the drink a rich golden brown. Hands one glass to Will.

“Thank you.” He sits in a cushy armchair.

Phoebe settles into an overstuffed brown leather sofa. She’s got more weight on her than her sister Madeleine Goddard did. No family photos adorn the wall, but plenty of brightly colored quilts cover the plaster. A knee-high metal statue of a garishly colored chicken stands next to the sofa. A cat tower takes up one side of the room by the windows, and from the top platform, a big tabby eyes him with suspicion.

“Have you found out anything about Maddy’s death?” she asks. Her eyes are earnest, eager. But the air around her is tinged with fear. Conflict.

“We’re investigating any possible connections between the victims. Did you or your sister know James Cooney?” Will slides out his photo of the young Cooney. James was a looker, with a square jaw and the same steely eyes as his dad.

She shakes her head. “He doesn’t look familiar.”

“How about Bill Ashcroft?” Will shows her another photo.

“‘Fraid not. He’s the new one, huh?” She twists her fingers together.

“He’s the latest victim, yes.” Will slides the photo back inside his coat. “Is there any way Madeleine could have known the victims?”

“Well, I’m not sure, Mr. Graham.” Phoebe’s lips pinch. “We’d been getting along just fine, but before she died, she told me she was seeing someone. She wouldn’t say who so I guessed he was a married man, and we had a bit of an argument.” Her eyes cut away, and she fingers the necklace around her neck. “I just don’t think she should go around messin’ with another woman’s man. But Maddy always did what she wanted. She says she wasn’t, just that she had to keep it quiet a while. And I said, ‘waitin’ on his divorce, then?’ She was hoppin’ mad.” Phoebe rubs a hand over her cheek, wincing as if remembering something uncomfortable. “She said he was a man with a reputation, so she just needed to wait until the timing was right.” Phoebe shrugs her thick shoulders. “She was a waitress, and gettin’ on forty. What man with a reputation is going to want to show her off?”

Regret and guilt radiates from this woman. Will can already tell it’s the result of good ol’ jealousy between sisters, but it goes deeper than that. They shared this house, their parents’ house, from what he can tell. Family photos did hang on these walls once upon a time, but Phoebe Hanes has removed them all and covered the evidence with her hobby. The sewing machine sits in a corner, piles of colorful fabric lying around in wicker baskets.

Phoebe waitresses as well. The two sisters made a modest living by waitressing. Sore backs and feet. Putting up with ungrateful customers, and probably a line cook with a short temper.

And now Madeleine is dead, and Phoebe regrets that fight. Feels guilty about her jealousy, angry at her guilt, but there's something else. Is it…relief?

"You worked at the same diner," he says. "Was anyone hanging around that seemed odd? Anyone waiting in their car in the parking lot? Anyone by themselves and loitering? Lingering longer than they should at a table?"

Phoebe shakes her head. "No. It's a popular diner. We get tourists, families from out of town. We get people on their way through town. Some people travel alone. I didn't notice anyone odd."

Will rubs his bearded chin. "Would any of Madeleine's friends know who the boyfriend was?"

"I was her best friend," Phoebe says, a hard edge glancing against her voice. Defensive. "But she did have other friends, of course. Mostly from the diner. Aster and Hannah were closest, I guess. They went dancing a lot."

"Where did they go dancing?"

"At a place called Rawly's."

A bell ring in Will's mind. Rawly's? That...is where Bill Ashcroft was headed to on the night he went missing. "Rawly's," he repeats.

"Yeah. Maybe she met her fella there? But I asked Aster and Hannah about it and they said they'd never seen her dancing with just one man in particular. They all dance with different men. Kinda the point of a girls' night out." Will can guess Phoebe was never invited.

"Sure. Can I have the numbers for Aster and Hannah? And their full names?"

Phoebe gives it to him while Will types into a notes app on his phone.

Shit. Did Jack show the owner of Rawly's a photo of Madeleine Goddard?

Or James Cooney. What if…?

It isn't far-fetched. James Cooney might've frequented Rawly's, too.

"Mr. Graham?" Phoebe's voice cuts through his thoughts.

"Sorry. I just—got lost in thought." Will bites his lip. Then speaks. "You know, we pulled Madeleine's phone records for our investigation. I can check for a man's number—"

"Hmph. I tried. When she was alive, of course," Phoebe says. "I took her phone while she was in the shower. Opened it up and looked. No texts with any men I didn't know." She must

read something on Will's face, because she adds, "She got involved with a married man once before, and it got ugly. I was just trying to protect her."

"It got ugly?"

"Yeah. It was years ago but his wife came into our diner yellin' her head off. Tried to yank Maddy's hair straight out. We had to break it up. Maddy almost lost her job."

"What's the wife's name?"

"She's moved away. Took the man with her. Good riddance, if you ask me. Why would you want to keep a man like that? They went to some town outside of Seattle, I heard."

And Madeleine's phone itself is sitting in an evidence bag back at the Fire Creek station. He knows Zeller powered it up and took a look but found nothing suspicious. "She must've been communicating with this mystery man, somehow."

Phoebe shrugs. "Yeah. Sure. Maybe Facebook? I don't really know. Could've been Snapchat or one of those other apps. You think he did it? It's always the boyfriend or the husband, right?" She laughs, but it's forced and ugly.

"May I see her room?" Will asks.

Phoebe gives him a look of surprise. She can't seem to find a reason to say no, so she nods quietly and leads him into the back hallway to a door graced by a wreath of fake yellow flowers.

The room is small, with a double bed taking up most of the space. A polaroid-crowned mirror hangs over a dusty dresser cluttered with jewelry, scrunchies, and receipts. Phoebe isn't in any of the polaroids. Photos at a diner show waitresses standing together in white aprons.

There's pictures of Madeleine Goddard and two other women, one brunette and the other blonde. "Aster and Hannah?" he asks, indicating the two women with his finger.

"Yeah." Phoebe frowns, looking around the room. "I have to clean this room out soon. I was thinking of renting it." She hugs herself. "Gets too quiet around here without her." She says this in a mutter, probably not even meaning to say it out loud. Then she looks at Will with a strange desperation in her eyes. "We didn't always get along, but I was her best friend."

Will keeps looking. The bed is made, with a handmade quilt on top. A decorative pillow sits at the head, all roses with sequined centers. A framed cross stitch hangs over the bed, saying, "Home Sweet Home," edged with colorful flowers. "Did she keep a diary?"

"Not that I ever saw."

Then Will sees it. In the corner, a gilt-edged vanity covered in white doilies and makeup products. The chair is pushed in—there isn't much room to push it out, really, with the bed behind it, but Madeleine had been slender.

On the seat of the chair is a thin grey laptop.

“Did she type much?” he asks.

“I mean, I don’t know her internet habits.” Defensive, again.

“Sure. It might be helpful if I took a look at her laptop though. I’d like to take it in and see if we can’t find any clues as to who this guy might have been.”

Phoebe waves a hand at the laptop. “Be my guest.”

Will slides past the bed and retrieves the laptop. He tucks the cord into the pocket of his coat.

Then he spends a few more minutes looking in all the obvious places. Phoebe hangs by the door, grief pouring off of her as she faces her dead sister’s belongings. Will tries to shield himself from her emotion and get a sense of Madeleine in this room. Madeleine, who was fun and flirtatious. Who liked men, but got herself stuck on one, and stuck with him until the relationship was definitely not gonna get anywhere. Madeleine, who loved to go after unavailable men. That way they’d always disappoint her, which in a way confirmed her belief in their uselessness and in her unworthiness. Madeleine...who did not have a job just at the diner, did she?

Will stares at the checkbook he’s just unearthed by pulling open the bedside table drawer. It’s not in Madeleine or Phoebe’s name. It’s an “Edna Miller.” Tucked inside is cash, and on top of that, a grocery list. Prune juice and Depends are included on the list. “Who’s Edna Miller?”

Phoebe startles, as if she’s been staring so long that Will faded away somewhere. “Oh. Um. She’s a little old lady that Maddy was helping out. Did her groceries and cleaned her house. Sweet thing.” Then she snorts. “It’s a wonder Edna is the way she is; her family is awful.”

“Awful?”

“Yeah. They came in saying Maddy was abusing her position. That she was mean to Edna, and she was telling Edna lies and making her confused. Like, we’re talking about an old lady who was losing her mind, and her family wasn’t around to take care of her. Maddy was a godsend for Edna.”

“Hm.” Will makes note of her name, and of the address on the checks. “Is it alright if I return her checkbook and money?”

“Oh.” Phoebe eyes the cash. Will can tell she regrets not looking in that drawer herself. “Yeah. I suppose someone should. Right?”

“Yes.” He folds it all into his pocket.

Phoebe seems about to protest, but she deflates. “Will you be much longer, Mr. Graham?”

“I think I’ve seen all I need to see,” he says. “But if you do find anything suspicious while you’re cleaning out her room, will you contact me?”

Phoebe huffs. “Yeah.” She stares at the laptop under his arm. “And do you think you’ll catch who did it?”

“I hope to, ma’am.”

Phoebe’s eyes glisten. “Maddy and I didn’t always get along. She had a mean streak in her. But I never wanted something like this to happen to her. She wasn’t that awful.”

Will sees it now. Phoebe was the sister who stayed home on the weekends, who couldn’t hope to outshine her vivacious, outgoing older sister. And Maddy made her feel small. Diminished. She kept her that way.

Well, maybe now Phoebe can step out from that shadow and find a light-filled place of her own. “I’m sure she didn’t deserve it. But you know, you don’t have to beat yourself up over it either.”

She glances at him sharply.

“You get to live your own life now.” He can see it. Madeleine laughing cruelly at her sister whenever Phoebe did dress up to go out. Madeleine making snide comments meant to cut Phoebe down a peg whenever she started to get uppity.

He’s not sure how this information comes to him, just that it does, and it does if he spends enough time in a person’s space, and people find it...off-putting, when he reveals any of this information to them.

Phoebe eyes him with suspicion. She’s about ready to throw him out.

Par for the course.

“I’ll be taking my leave.” He hands her his card. “Please call me if anything should come to you.”

She ushers him silently to the front door. When he steps out, she doesn’t say anything. Just closes the door behind him.

He sighs as he heads for the car, his pocket stuffed with cash and a checkbook, and a laptop held in the crook of his elbow.

Before stopping at the house of Edna Miller, Will picks up everything that was on the grocery list. He knocks on the door.

A short, petite woman with bird-like bones opens it. She scans the grocery bags in Will’s arms and glances up at him warily. “Yes?”

“Uh, I’m looking for Edna Miller,” he says. He gestures with the groceries, the crinkle of the bags loud in the space between them. “I just came from Madeleine Goddard’s house, and she had a checkbook of Ms. Miller’s, plus this grocery list with cash, so I thought I’d grab them for her.”

“You another con artist?” The woman growls. Her eyes are flinty with anger. “I’ll take back my mother’s checkbook, but you can take your crap and get on out of here.”

Will blinks. “I’m an FBI agent, ma’am. I’m investigating Madeleine Goddard’s death, and I’m returning Ms. Miller’s things while I’m at it.”

The laugh that erupts from the woman is more like a bark. “Well, ain’t that presumptuous of ya.” The woman opens her door wider. “Ms. Miller is dead, and right now, we’re trying to undo the damage that Goddard woman did. Now let me see your identification.”

Will puts the groceries on the porch, and digs out his badge. “May I ask your name?”

She glares at his ID. Then at him. “Grace Miller. I’m Edna’s daughter.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” He retrieves the bags from the ground after tucking his badge away. “May I come in? I’d like to ask you some questions.”

The look on the woman’s face smolders, but she steps back to let him in. She leads him to the kitchen and tells him to lay the groceries on the counter. “The cash woulda been handier, but I guess I can donate some of this stuff to the food bank.”

Will tries not to regret having bought the groceries. It’s not his usual m.o., but he needed some time to think, and somewhere to go to do it. And he thought getting the groceries might sweeten up the old lady he’d thought he’d see. “Can you explain this situation with Madeleine Goddard and your mother?”

Grace’s lips are pressed into a thin line, and a muscle ripples in her jaw. “Madeleine Goddard started helping my mother out a few years ago. Simple things, like bringing her groceries or dinner from that diner she worked at. She cleaned, too. None of us lived nearby, so we were grateful to her at first, which was stupid of us.”

“You and...you have siblings?”

“My brother and another sister. Joe and Faith. Joe works in Lexington. Faith moved to New York City years ago. I live outside Louisville. Or I did, anyway. I just got divorced, and my husband and I split the sale of the house.” She says this like she expects Will to remark on her divorce. Will can tell that her grief is so tied up with her anger, it’s hard to tell where one emotion ends and another begins. There’s a good deal of self-recrimination to be found there, too.

“And when did this arrangement seem off to you?”

“When I found out my mother gave power-of-attorney to that bitch.”

Will can feel his eyebrows lift. “That’s unusual.”

“Yeah. Turns out she changed her will, too. But I know it was Madeleine Goddard. I called mama every Sunday after church. She seemed fine.” She draws in a breath. “Then one night, my oldest son breaks his arm. I’m in the hospital, and I called my mother, because I was worried, you know? About my son. And I realized I hadn’t called her that day. So I call her and she barely knew who I was. She was confused.” She shakes her head. “That’s when I called her doctor, and when I tried to reach Madeleine, and then I tried to look into taking over her healthcare, and I found out she’d given over power of all her assets to that conwoman.”

She leans heavily against the kitchen counter. “I told Joe and Faith. We started an investigation, an official investigation for elder abuse and all that. And it seemed like everything was on the up and up, and we’d have to fight it in court. Except for one thing: mama was afraid. She was afraid of us, and she was afraid of Madeleine Goddard. She ain’t ever been afraid of anything her whole life. My daddy used to beat her, and she’d give it right back to him. I think Madeleine convinced her we wanted her dead so that we could take her money—she’d won a settlement when our daddy was hit by a car. He died. She got the winnings, and it was a lot of money. I know she put it into college funds for our kids, but now those funds are gone.” She grips the counter edge so hard her knuckles turn white. “We should have noticed her mind was going sooner. We should have been there for her.”

There is it. The guilt. The self-recrimination.

“Anyway, when Madeleine showed up dead, we got back mama’s assets. And then mama died.” Grace folds her arms. “She’d been wasting away, it seemed like. Then just up and died. Doctors could never figure out what was wrong with her. That was that.” Her eyes are fierce and red when she meets Will’s gaze. “She didn’t even know who I was.”

“I’m sorry,” Will says. It occurs to him, of course, that Grace could be a suspect in Madeleine’s murder. But for Bill Ashcroft and James Cooney? Was Grace the creature that would kill in retribution, as if it were a sacrificial warning? Hang the victims in ash trees tied with kudzu?

No. None of that is here. It’s just anger, so much anger. And guilt.

Just like with Phoebe Hanes, though this one is more pelting ice-cold hail than Phoebe’s.

“Do you know if Madeleine Goddard ever had any gentleman callers while here at your mother’s house?” he asks, gently.

Grace snaps a hot glare at him. “How would I know?”

“Did she ever mention a man, or did your mother ever possibly mention something?”

“No. Did this guy kill Madeleine Goddard and that other guy?”

“I’m trying to cover every avenue.” Will sends her a gentle smile. “Did you know James Cooney?”

She shakes her head no, biting down on her lower lip, her arms still folded.

“What about Bill Ashcroft?”

“Who?”

“The body of Bill Ashcroft was discovered this past weekend.” It’s only Sunday. He’s been investigating this for a full week.

“Oh. In Fire Creek? I heard something about it. The name’s not familiar.”

Will pulls out his photo and shows her. She shakes her head no.

“Have you ever frequented a place called Rawly’s?”

She shakes her head. “No. I know it, but it’s not my kinda place.”

“What kinda place is it?”

She pulls her shoulders up. “Loud. Has a dancefloor on one side, I hear. Redneck bar on the other. Lotsa fights happen there. A few years ago, a waitress was shot by her husband when she was carrying garbage out the back door.”

“Bet that doesn’t do much for their reputation.”

“Nope. Place is a hellhole, if you ask me.”

“Well. I want to thank you for your time, Ms. Miller.”

“Grace is fine,” she says, almost automatically. “Is it a serial killer?”

Will still has the urge to say no, but all evidence points otherwise. “We’re still investigating that matter, Grace.”

Grace releases a heavy sigh. “Fine. Have a nice day, Agent.” She gestures toward the direction of the front door. Will pulls out his card and lays it on the counter next to the grocery bags. “Thank you.” And he sees himself out.

Betty’s is as bland as anything, with overcooked peas and carrots as a side dish to his chicken-fried steak. Will eats his late lunch quietly in the corner, ignoring the glances of the locals.

He should be thinking about the case. Madeleine Goddard, a woman who would take advantage of a little old lady in the eyes of Grace Miller and her siblings. A complicated older sister for Phoebe Hanes. A vivacious waitress who liked to go dancing at a dive bar on weekends with her two friends, and engaged in a clandestine arrangement with some mystery guy.

James Cooney, said to be popular with the ladies, a man's man, well on his way to becoming head at the MTR company. Could he have been the mystery man?

Bill Ashcroft, a big deal in a small town, loved by his brother, respected by his wife, disdained by most members of the community. Maybe it was him.

But Will doesn't want to think about any of it. He wants to stare out the window to the greenery he can see between the buildings across the way. To the mountains rising up over those same buildings. To a lovely little wood cabin on the mountainside, with a view that overlooks the valley.

And about a man with a kind, soft smile and a penchant for cooking. For art and for music. A creative, passionate soul with a pet dog. The kind of life Will almost wishes he had for himself. But how would he fit in, anyway? His job is at the BAU, and his...peculiarities...tend to push him away from close friendship, from prolonged relationships. From closeness and intimacy of the emotional, sensual kind.

Sex has never been a problem. But real intimacy. Will yearns for that from the marrow of his bones.

He takes another bite of the peas and carrots without tasting them. Then he scrapes the rest of it into the garbage and places the tray atop of the trash can.

He's so far into his imaginings—what life would be like, peaceful and tender with a partner like Hannibal at his side, when he almost bumps into a large figure outside Betty's.

"Jesus, sorry!" He looks up at who he almost shoved.

His heart drops into his stomach, and his stomach has probably dropped to the floor.

It's Hannibal.

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